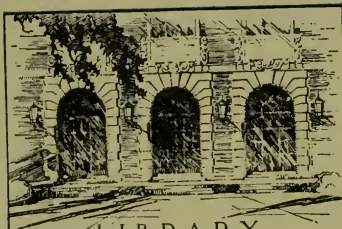




TOO FAST TO LAST

By
JOHN MILLS





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TOO FAST TO LAST.

VOL. III.

Mrs G. Thirkell

TOO FAST TO LAST

BY

JOHN MILLS

AUTHOR OF

“THE OLD ENGLISH GENTLEMAN”

&c., &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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TOO FAST TO LAST.

CHAPTER I.

THE thin sounding tick-tock of the clock on the high, intricately carved oak mantelshelf of the room in which Colonel Leferne and Jeremiah Early were sitting, when the minute and hour hands announced that midnight was near, told its own story of being nearly worn out in measuring the past. The old clock had struck the hours of the births and the hours of the deaths of generations of the Lefernes, and it was now about to mark the time of the introduction of the last heir to the ancient honours which

awaited him, in due order of succession, just twenty-one years ago, neither more nor less.

At the last stroke of the old clock, as it completed the hour of twelve, Aubrey Leferne would attain his majority—the heir of the old knightly family, and the last of his race.

On the table, and in front of the lawyer, was arranged several skins of parchment engrossed in black letters with a phraseology too technical for ordinary comprehension; but signifying, nevertheless, a remarkably clear and conclusive mode by which a family estate, devised in fee for ever, might be disentailed with one stroke of the pen, and sold to the highest bidder.

Within easy reach of Jeremiah Early was an inkstand and a small bundle of pens bound with red tape. Selecting one with care he held it above his head, between the light of the lamp and himself, and minutely examined the nib, while now and then he

cast an impatient look at the face of the old clock, slowly but surely approaching the hour of twelve.

“I was just thinking, Early,” observed the colonel, sitting in the dark shade thrown by the lamp to the further end of the room, and beating a slow, dull, monotonous sound on the elbow of his chair, “what two unmitigated scoundrels we should look on canvas, if sketched by the master hand of an artist !”

Jeremiah Early continued to look at the point of the pen which he held between his fingers ; but gave no reply.

“Within a few minutes, my son,” resumed the colonel, “will be his own master, and the control of his deeds and misdeeds must rest with himself when those two hands join in pointing to the coming hour.”

“I begin to think that the clock must be slow,” replied the lawyer, with a gesture of impatience.

"It can scarcely be that," rejoined the colonel, with a slight variation in the tune still being played on the elbow of the chair in which he was seated, "for what we are about to do. Instead of being near," continued he, "the time could scarcely be too distant for the execution of an act little short of an execrable crime."

"I have known you to be less scrupulous," returned Jeremiah Early, with a sneer, "when an impediment has stood in the way of your interests."

"Ay!" added the colonel, with what sounded like a long-drawn but stifled sigh. "Who shall tell the depth he will reach when he plunges into the vortex of ruin?"

"You were once the master of the opportunity to retrieve your fallen fortunes," responded the lawyer, with mingled bitterness of tone and expression. "Perhaps you may now feel what too late means."

"You refer to my Derby victory," re-

turned the colonel, drawing back the angles of his mouth, and changing the air to one of a lively kind. "It was a great race, and brilliantly won by a first-class racehorse."

"I wish that his neck or heart had been broken instead!" bitterly ejaculated Jeremiah Early. "Had you not played that trick with me I should have been a debtor instead of a creditor."

"But in the absence of the trick of which you complain," retorted the colonel, "I should not have been a spectator of a triumph of priceless worth, and you will do me the justice to recollect that the trick was rather of a forced character than chosen. You threatened," continued he, "if my memory is not treacherous, to sell even the easy chair in which I now sit, to be catalogued with the culinary pots and pans."

"I used the threat as the means to the end," responded the lawyer, surlily, "but without intending to put it into execution."

“No greater mistake could have been committed, Early,” rejoined the colonel, throwing his head back, and looking at the lawyer with half-closed, sleepy eyes. “I invariably construe a plain signification from plain language. If a man,” continued he, “in speaking of a crowbar means a tooth-pick, the misinterpretation must rest with himself.”

“But you——”

“Temporarily played the most unfortunate of all games,” interrupted the colonel, “that of fast and loose. My pecuniary interests, combined with the expressed design of taking away my easy-chair, and the whole of the goods and chattels beneath this ancient roof, even to the daubs of portraits of my revered ancestors, tempted me, Early,” continued the colonel, in a tone and manner of the most perfect indolence, “to accede to your rascally proposition, and, in so doing, I became a partner of

a moiety of the villainy which should have transferred both at once to the hands of the hangman, under that stringent law which would have flatly denied us the benefit of the clergy."

The lawyer was about making an observation, but the colonel's two fingers were raised languidly, and the signal for silence was obeyed.

"When too late—as most mundane benefits are," resumed the colonel, "to prevent your laying against the Unknown, on our joint account, to an extent not likely to be forgotten on this side of eternity, I was tempted to change the game from fast to loose, and run the horse to win."

Jeremiah Early, at this juncture, gave a deep and audible groan, expressive of great mental anguish.

"Do me the favour," observed the colonel, "not to repeat that uneuphonious grunt, as it interferes with the chain of my thoughts.

The temptation," continued he, "was too great to be resisted. The chance—the probable chance—of realizing the phantom hope of my life resolved me, at the last moment, to withdraw the order I had given, let the consequences be what they might."

Jeremiah Early was about repeating the "uneuphonious grunt;" but two raised fingers operated as a decided check, and it died away upon his lips.

"In the conclusion of this brief summary of events I shall not trespass upon your attention much longer," said the colonel. "An interval has taken place since they were recorded among the things of the past, and we each know the effects of the present, however questionable may be those of the unknown future."

"We are both without a single shilling to call our own," growled the lawyer, throwing the pen from his fingers on the table.

“Without a single shilling to call our own!” repeated he.

“But you had my solemn promise,” rejoined the colonel, “to make things as pleasant as possible at the very earliest opportunity. For the sacrifice made in not carrying out our iniquitous fraud, so that my personal ambition or vanity might be gratified, I pledged you the honour of a gentleman that to-night I would unhesitatingly rob my son of his birthright.”

“You think he will sign?” said the lawyer, glancing nervously at the face of the old clock.

“Had *you* not thought so,” returned the colonel, “there would have been another occupant, ere now, of my easy-chair.”

“But I’m asking what *you* think,” responded Jeremiah Early, “and at a critical moment.”

“Like most of the Lefernes who have preceded him,” added the colonel, with a

smothered laugh, "my son would require little persuasion to sign anything—even his own death warrant."

"Is he prepared for your request?" asked the lawyer.

"I have been in the habit of receiving implicit obedience at the time of giving my orders," replied the colonel. "As soon as Aubrey is of age to act for himself," continued he, "which, by a ridiculous fiction of the law, will be within one minute from this time of the world's monotonous and stupid history, I will press upon him the paramount necessity of doing his affectionate duty to his father by impoverishing himself."

The first stroke of the hammer of the old clock, which had struck the hours of the births and deaths of generations of the Lefernes, now fell with a clear, thin, ringing sound upon the ear.

"The moment has arrived," observed the colonel, "for the consummation of our ras-

cality. Pull the bell, Early, and we will learn if Aubrey is occupied in playing with his doll."

CHAPTER II.

MR. SOPPY—Mr. Thomas Soppo—appeared promptly in answer to the summons, and, having entered the room by opening the door and closing it gently behind him, stood in the first position, with his toes turned out, and a blended air of meek attention and polite deference.

“Where is my son?” inquired the colonel.

Mr. Soppo began to chafe the knuckles of one hand with the palm of the other.

“If I might be permitted to give an opinion, sir,” replied Mr. Soppo, blandly, “without offence to either party, I should say that Master Aubrey, being tired with a-walking and a-talking with a certain young

gal up and down in front of the daffodils, had gone to bed, having, of course, first said his prayers like a gentleman."

Mr. Soppo bowed lowly as he spoke, thinking, with the utmost sincerity, that a gentleman saying his prayers ought to command more than ordinary respect.

"They were together when you saw them last?" observed the colonel.

"As usual, sir," rejoined Mr. Soppo, plainly, and to the point.

"The fate of the Lefernes!" returned the colonel, in a voice addressed only to himself. "Always a doll, like a syren on the rock!"

"Master Aubrey, sir," added Mr. Soppo, "vouchsafed to make a confidential communication."

"What was it?" asked the colonel.

"In strict confidence, sir," replied Mr. Soppo, continuing to rub the knuckles of one hand with the palm of the other, "he

threatened that, if I were watching his movements to-night in order to report them to you, he'd punch my nose."

"I could scarcely have rebuked him from carrying his threat into execution," added the colonel. "Knowledge is power," continued he, "and my son knows how to punch a nose scientifically."

"I can bear testimony to that, sir," replied Mr. Sippy, "having had tears brought into my heyes from a straight shot from the shoulder more than once."

"You say that my son has retired to rest?" said the colonel.

"As a matter of *hopinion*, sir," responded Mr. Sippy, "I should say that, at the present moment, he is between the sheets and blankets."

"Get a lamp," rejoined the colonel, "and show the way to his room."

Having the means ready at hand, Mr. Sippy promptly appeared bearing a small

lamp of antique shape, the flame of which flickered with a pale, uncertain light.

“Now, Early,” said the colonel, rising from his chair and stretching out his arms above his head, “let us earn the reward of two execrable scamps.”

Jeremiah Early made no reply, but gathering together the skins of parchment on the table, and the pen with the finely-pointed nib which he had selected, he also rose from his chair, and followed in the wake of the colonel as he quitted the room, the van being led by Mr. Sippy, who carried in his hand the lamp of antique shape.

Mr. Thomas Sippy's nerves were, perhaps, never of the strongest, and from increasing infirmities, and circumstances over which he had not the slightest power, both the natural and supernatural causes of his fears became greater as he grew older, and he knew of but one spot of peaceful rest, and that was the flat bosom of his wife with

his eyes closed. As he led the way through the long, dark passages, with the flickering flame of the lamp momentarily threatened to be extinguished by the strong draughts of air which swept through them—the family portraits frowning and scowling upon him as he passed—Mr. Sippy felt strongly disposed to double back upon his line and bolt. The obstacle to this course, however, was the colonel in the immediate rear, and this strengthened him in his resolve to go on. Mr. Sippy led the way, possessing at the same time an unusually strong desire to bring up the rear, supposing the shade of a wish to exist concerning his most reluctant presence, let the position be where it might.

The small procession having gone in a straight line where it was practicable, and turned, twisted, and twined where it was not, arrived at length at the closed door of the apartment occupied by Aubrey Leferne as his dormitory since he was an infant, not

only in the great goggle eyes of the Law, but in the more tender ones of Aunt Margaret, who, more frequently than he suspected, even in his dreams, watched his slumber, and smiled with pleasure to see him smiling in his sleep.

“Shall I knock, sir?” inquired Mr. Sippy, turning half round for instructions as he held the clenched knuckles of his left hand ready for action.

Greatly to his surprise, he received no answer, and, just as he was about repeating the question, the lamp was snatched from his hand by Colonel Leferne, who held it at arm’s length above his head, and stood as if turned into stone, gazing with a fixed look into the impenetrable darkness beyond.

“What was that?” ejaculated he, with blanched features and bloodless lips.

At these words Mr. Sippy appeared to shut up like a large telescope, and gently

to slide upon the floor, more dead than alive, in a heap of inexpressible fear.

"I saw nothing," replied Jeremiah Early, "excepting our own shadows."

"It was no shadow that *I* saw," rejoined the colonel, moving forward.

"Stay," returned the lawyer, placing a hand upon the colonel's arm next to him. "We are here upon a plain matter of business which admits of no delay. The following of shadows," continued he, "can be postponed."

"Do you suspect ——"

"I suspect nothing," interrupted Jeremiah Early; "but I want the signature of your son to these deeds, and the time for the execution is now, and the place here," and, as he spoke, he pointed to the door close to which they were still standing.

For a few brief moments Colonel Leferne appeared undecided how to act or what to do. He still stood with the lamp held

above his head, staring into the darkness, motionless and silent.

“Shall I or will you open this door?” asked the lawyer, preparing to turn the handle.

Regaining consciousness—admitting that it had temporarily departed—enabled Mr. Sippy to understand that one of his prerogatives was in danger, and, with a fine conservative sense of his own privileges, he determined not only to assert his right but to maintain it.

“Excuse me, sir,” said he, repossessing the noble position of an upright and forked animal, “but no one must do that while I live and am near.”

To a signal now given by the colonel, who seemed to look and act like one in a dream, Mr. Sippy applied gentle and noiseless force to the handle of the door, and the procession of three entered the apartment, large, dark, and desolate.

Nothing, indeed, could be seen as they entered but the darkness made visible by the lamp still carried by Colonel Leferne. Upon a forward movement being made, however, a small bedstead was perceptible in the shade, and, as they approached it, Mr. Sippy would not have felt surprised—if bruised—at a hard substance coming in contact with his head, possibly in the shape of a pair of boots; but nothing broke the utmost serenity and quietude of Aubrey Leferne's dormitory, and, for undisturbed silence, it might have been his tomb.

One wave of the lamp, however, revealed that no head had pressed upon the pillow that night.

“What does this mean?” asked Jeremiah Early, with a suspicious frown.

“That my son not being in his bed,” replied the colonel, “we must seek him elsewhere. Nothing can be plainer or more easy of comprehension.”

"I was led to believe that I should find him here," rejoined the lawyer, in a tone which seemed to convey a reserved but revengeful meaning.

"And you now know," returned the colonel, in a manner which left little doubt that his humour was quite equal to the occasion, "that you were misled. Have you anything more to say or for me to infer?" and, as he spoke, he made one stride towards Jeremiah Early which brought them close together, face to face.

For a moment Jeremiah Early met the colonel's steadfast, passionate look; but it was more than he could bear longer, and his eyes drooped beneath the gaze.

"I'm not in the vein to submit to insult," continued he, "as you will soon discover if, by word or gesture, you dare offer one."

As the colonel spoke, the lawyer might have thought that he was one of the knightly Lefernes in the portrait gallery,

placing lance in rest ready for a tilt, so strangely like was the fierce expression of the past and the present.

"You think," resumed the colonel, "that, in not finding my son here, some deception has been practised ; but, for your own safety, you had better dispel that thought at once and for ever."

"Then let him be found," quietly suggested Jeremiah Early. "Your engagement of many years' standing," continued he, "was to have these deeds signed by Aubrey Leferne on the night and at the hour he came of age. That is all I want in justice to yourself and me."

"But what shall be said as to him?" returned the colonel, with a sneer of contempt.

"I'm not here to discuss the interests of others," added the lawyer, sullenly, "but to support my own."

"Perhaps, sir," said Mr. Sippy, in tremu-

lous accents, as he produced a sealed letter, "this may hexplain something. I found it lying on that table," continued he, pointing to one within a few feet of where he stood, "and which I daresay I should have seen before had I possessed the heyes of a cat."

It was short work to clutch the letter from Mr. Soppy's hand, and as Colonel Leferne tore it open, and eagerly scanned the contents, the lawyer was shrewd enough to see that no deception was being practised.

"To-night," read the colonel, as the lamp threw a pale, dim ray on the paper, "I am my own master, and, fretful of control, I have left to '*live with will unfettered*'—it must be for long, and it may be for ever.

"AUBREY LEFERNE."

The letter fell mechanically from the colonel's fingers, as he turned, with a stead-

fast look, to gaze in bewildered silence at Jeremiah Early.

“We are ruined!” gasped the lawyer in despair—“both are ruined!”

CHAPTER III.

THE soft, balmy air of Italy, breathed in her island home of Capri, had not added to the fresh tint on the cheeks of Ivy Girling. Many long, weary months had passed since she arrived, a stranger in a strange land, accompanied by him who left his home to "live with will unfettered," and it had not escaped Aubrey Leferne's notice that the colour which he had admired so long began to fade too soon. Pale and paler still the white rose began to usurp the place of the red, and often, when trying to look most happy by his side, she looked most sad. He had given, however, no cause for her to blame or reproach him.

His promise to be kind to her had been strictly kept, and, if somewhat wearied with the practice, he had done his best to conceal the feeling from her, with what result was only known silently to herself.

High up on the rock-ribbed shore, overlooking the bay which in the calm of a summer's night reflected like a mirror the stars glistening above, they had made their home, chosen for its being secluded, and by itself. In the distant outline was the coast of Sorrento, while Vesuvius and Mount St. Angelo rose in bold relief, and stood out like towering and frowning giants. The vine-crowned hill of the Vomero, with the convent spires of Mount Camaldoli, and the dark groves surrounding the villas beneath, formed a scene upon which Ivy's gaze had often rested with admiration mingled with sorrowful thoughts of home.

Home? God help her! she had no home.

Such in her heart was the answer to the thought.

One night they sat looking from the verge of the cliff, as they had often looked before, at the beautiful lake-like bay before them, and listening to the barcaroles and Neapolitan airs played and sung by those gayer in spirits than themselves in the dim, fading shades of twilight.

“Do you see that boat, Aubrey?” said Ivy, placing a hand in one of his, and drawing his attention to a vessel gliding past in the distance, leaving a long, silvery track in her wake, as if her course was to be marked for ever on the waves.

Yes, he saw it, and was condescending enough to say so.

“That bright shining line,” rejoined Ivy, “behind her white sails, which look like the broad, outspread wings of a swan, puts me in mind of something, Aubrey.”

“Does it?” returned he, carelessly.

“It seems,” she continued, with a heaving breast—but the sigh as it rose was checked—“like the memory of past happiness.”

“Whatever has gone,” added Aubrey Leferne, “possesses but little interest for me.”

An interval of silence now took place, while her hand, still resting in his, might have been one that he had never pressed.

“You begin to feel as I do, I suppose,” continued he, “tired of this slow existence.”

Ivy withdrew her hand as if an adder had stung it; but he took no notice of the action. It was a matter of indifference to him, and whether left or removed he appeared neither to know nor care.

“Coming here as we did,” resumed he, “how or why I can scarcely tell, excepting that you meant to run away with me as soon as you could,” continued Aubrey, with a laugh which jarred harshly on her ear, “with an exchequer too low to be agree-

able upon our arrival, and which has gradually become lower, notwithstanding our ascetic fare, principally of fish caught by myself and fruit gathered by you, I know that the poetry of our Capri life, Ivy, must give place to the history of stern reality."

She listened attentively, but said nothing.

"Like the Prodigal Son," continued Aubrey, in a tone of levity, "I must return to my father, and make an eloquent speech relating to my misdeeds, hoping for forgiveness and money."

"You said," observed Ivy, in a voice scarcely above a whisper, "that *you* must return. Am I not to accompany you?"

"If it were possible, Ivy," responded he, with the hesitation of one knowing that the lie was in his heart, "you should as a matter of course; but the means are not at my command."

"What, then," she returned, in a soft,

supplicating voice, while a hand seemed instinctively to seek one of his, "is to become of me?"

"Oh!" exclaimed Aubrey Leferne, with a laugh, which sounded light and gay, "you must sit and watch and weep, singing plaintive songs, and doing the love-sick lady for the return of her knight. Old stories tell," continued he, still laughing, "that the beautiful and the best have had to undergo similar trials of patience with some of my ancestors."

In the fast darkening shades of evening he might not have seen the pallor which spread itself over Ivy's features from brow to chin; but it had the hue of one whose heart had ceased to beat.

"It's very unpleasant, and all that sort of thing," continued Aubrey, "to be compelled to leave you, Ivy, even for a short time; but what is to be done?"

She was as mute and inanimate as the dead.

"We have been in this Paradise together," resumed Aubrey, "in what may be called an undisturbed state of heavenly bliss for some months, and the time having arrived for a change we must be prepared for it. Nothing lasts for an indefinite time, Ivy, as I told you when a fellow on the sixth form."

"You told me a thousand times," replied Ivy, in a weak, faint tone, but he heard each syllable with painful distinctness, "that your love for me would never change."

"To be sure I did," rejoined he, "and I'm ready to make the number a couple of thousand, beginning now, if that will please you."

A deeply drawn sigh was her only response.

"What greater proof of my affection could you have," resumed Aubrey, "than my running away on the very night of my

coming of age, and bringing you here where we have lived together, Ivy, without the separation of an hour?"

She listened, but said nothing.

"In a hut built for a common Capri fisherman—beautifully situated, I admit," continued he, "I have been as patient as possible, and never grumbled once at our rough quarters, or the fare better adapted for a peasant than a gentleman."

His thoughts being of himself exclusively, there was now no reference to her.

"But in leaving your home for this," replied Ivy, with a reproachful look, but it was lost upon him, for his head was turned aside, "you caused me to leave mine."

"Pray don't argue when there's no difference of opinion upon an admitted fact," rejoined Aubrey, with irritation in tone and manner. "I asked, pleaded, pressed, prayed—if you like it better—for you to go with me, otherwise there would have been

no temptation for me to have gone, and you consented, after declaring, girl-like, in the most positive terms, that nothing could, would, or should induce you to leave your father. That's how the matter confessedly stood between us, and stands at the present time."

"Concerning the past," returned Ivy, "I have nothing to blame you for. You promised much, and I believed in all you said."

"Which was girl-like in the extreme," added Aubrey, "and therefore anything the opposite of sensible. At the same time," continued he, "I mean to give no cause to be reproached for the future. You will find in me, Ivy, a remarkable descendant of the Lefernes, who kept strict faith in love—his first and only love."

"Speak not so carelessly of what it has been," earnestly pleaded she, in broken accents, "and what it must be still, if my heart is not to break."

“I fully expected the melodramatic introduction of the broken heart,” responded Aubrey. “It is sure to come in, like most things not wanted, at the improper place.”

“Do not leave me here alone,” sobbed Ivy. “I shall die before your return.”

Softened, perhaps, by the too natural expression of her feelings, Aubrey placed an arm around her waist, and, drawing her head upon his shoulder to rest there, began to pass the ends of the golden and clustering tresses through his fingers.

“Listen,” said he, and, as he spoke, he pressed a kiss upon her brow. “We have not the means of remaining longer here, even in the poor and humble way in which we have lived, and, if we had, I will not deny that I am weary for want of change. We must have a new home, Ivy, not so far removed from the world, of which neither you nor I have had the opportunity of seeing much. To effect this I have no

option but to leave you. It will not be long for you to remain without me, as you may accept my solemn promise of returning as quickly as circumstances and distance will permit."

"I shall not—cannot live alone!" murmured Ivy, with scalding tears tracing deep lines of sorrow down her cheeks.

"We know but little of our own powers until putting them to the test," replied he. "You will live to welcome me back, Ivy, and, as I sail across this bay again, you'll forget, in the joy of meeting, all these childish fears."

She knew full well that further remonstrance was useless. His avowed resolution was to go, and she knew, from a few solitary pages of the past, that her fate was to be left—let the result be to her death itself.

"I must seek my father——"

"Promise me not to meet mine," interrupted Ivy, with an energy of expression

which almost startled her companion, "or there may be murder. Promise me this," she continued, with her hands clasped upon his shoulders, and looking with a close, anxious gaze into his eyes, as if to read therein what might be his destiny if that interview took place.

"We shall not meet from any intention on my part," rejoined Aubrey, "as unpleasant scenes are always to be avoided when practicable; but whoever attempted my life," continued he, "would run the imminent risk of forfeiting his own."

"You would not lift your hand against my father?" exclaimed Ivy, with overwhelming horror at the thought.

"But once, perhaps," returned he, significantly touching his breast, which concealed a weapon as ready for use as a wasp's sting, "if he raised his against me."

She gave no reply; for, as this threat was made, all power of speech seemed to

have gone, and, as if paralysed with terror at some foreboding evil, she fell like one dead at his feet.

CHAPTER IV.

IN compliance with the colonel's mandate to disentomb one of the finest magnums of port buried in the catacombs of the Hall of Greatwood Park, Mr. Sippy executed the order, without requiring further particulars, by placing the time-crusted measure within easy reach of the Rev. Robert Roundhead, who smiled graciously at its introduction, and bowed politely at the bottle as it was invitingly put before him on the table.

“You will find that wine, Bob,” familiarly observed the colonel, “exactly suited to your good taste, or I am greatly mistaken.”

In certain matters of a mundane kind the vicar never allowed his judgment to be warped by a direct or indirect opinion whether interested or otherwise, and, acting upon this general principle in the present instance, he mechanically proceeded to fill a glass in silence and raise it to his lips. Slowly, drop by drop, the wine passed over his palate, and, as it did so, the warm tint of inward satisfaction, spreading in a glow over his features, offered presumptive evidence that the critical decision was in favour of the quality being unexceptionable.

“As you supposed, my dear Ned,” replied the vicar, pursing his lips together and separating them with a loud smack, “nothing could more thoroughly coincide with my opinion of what really grand wine should be than this.”

“Take another glass, Bob,” rejoined the colonel.

The Rev. Robert Roundhead obeyed the

injunction without an interval bearing the name of lengthened.

“It may enable you to be philosophically patient during the relation I am about to deliver in the hope of relieving some excessive pressure here, Bob,” and as the colonel spoke he drew a hand languidly across his forehead while the other was employed in beating a phantom tune on the table, for not a note could be heard.

The vicar cleared his throat preparatory to making a response ; but two raised fingers rendered him mute at the very moment he was about speaking, and he swallowed his words like pills, applying the contents of his glass to carry out the convulsive effort.

“Irrespective of troubles with which you, Bob, are as well acquainted as myself,” began the colonel, “there are things perplexing me which you know nothing of.”

The vicar lifted his eyebrows as a signal of silent astonishment.

“On the night that my son forgot his filial duty by quitting his home so unceremoniously,” continued the colonel, “and as we approached the door of his chamber, I saw—or thought I saw—in the gallery beyond, that which seemed to stop the pulsation of my heart.”

A spasmodic question was on the vicar’s lips; but it was effectually choked as the two fingers again caught his view.

“Our purpose, as you know, in being there,” resumed the colonel, “was not of the most pleasant kind, or one adapted to soothe the nervous system. Two greater scoundrels than myself and Jeremiah Early,” continued he, “I can scarcely conceive to be more diabolically employed, and with this impression on an excited brain, I readily admit what visionary effects might be. It is impossible, however, to get rid of facts rendered manifest to our senses by specious arguments concerning unhealthy vapours of

the brain. That which our eyes behold, we see."

The vicar gave a nod of silent approval, and, thinking it about time to replenish his glass, did so.

"You saw my wife on the night she became a mother?" said the colonel, inquiringly.

The Rev. Robert Roundhead, having raised his glass in close proximity to his lips, gradually lowered it, and replaced it solemnly on the table.

"He had."

That was all he said.

Colonel Leferne's angry glance darting beneath his knitted brow, momentarily revealed an emotion not intended to be seen; but, as if aware of the mistake committed, the angles of his mouth were suddenly drawn back, and a light, cheerful air was re-commenced on the table.

"You remember the night and the cir-

cumstance?" said the colonel, with a smile of his own manufacture.

It had not been forgotten, and never would be. Such was the substance of the reply.

"There were echoes of suffering not likely to be forgotten by those who heard them—eh, Bob?"

The effect of those piercing cries was too fresh still, although long years had fled since they were uttered, and the thought was pain to him who had listened to them, little short of agony.

"An unpleasant recollection," observed the colonel, still drumming a tune of a lively kind, "but one which I desire to be recalled to your memory."

Nothing could be more fresh between the past and the present. He heard them now.

"From that moment," resumed the colonel, but his fingers were motionless as he spoke, "my wife, and the young mother

of my child, was pronounced to be mad, the inference being that I had made her so."

The cause, perhaps, being deemed sufficient for the result, not a syllable was offered by way of mitigating it by the Rev. Robert Roundhead.

"The quarrel that we had," continued the colonel, with his fingers still motionless, "leading to the total aberration of reason, was the first and the last. We never knew what a word of dissension meant before or after."

The vicar was listening to a repetition of a black page of the family history as well known to himself as to the narrator; but, from what he either said or did, it might have been an unknown one to him.

"Being governed by professional advice," resumed the colonel, "and told that, from symptoms of the softening of the brain, recovery was impossible, I arranged for her admission into a *maison de santé* in France,

which, I suppose, buried my wife from the world—and from me.”

The Rev. Robert Roundhead decidedly coincided in the hypothesis, but reserved the smallest expression of an opinion concerning it.

“Having exhibited a firm, if not obstinate resolve to oppose my wishes and interests,” said the colonel, “I will say nothing about my sorrow at the separation. Anything and anyone thwarting me I hate, and I can hate, Bob, better than I can love.”

It was a well-known and historical failing of the family, and no one was more intimately acquainted with it than the vicar.

“Failing to possess that which I regarded as my own from the moment of my marriage,” continued the colonel, “I looked upon my wife, Bob, as the sole prostrating cause of my fallen fortunes.”

Under a confessed influence of this kind,

there could be no doubt concerning the result.

“And my only hope concerning her was that we should never meet again.”

“Which, I believe, has been realized to the letter,” responded the vicar, as if speaking to himself.

“From time to time,” resumed the colonel, re-commencing the light air upon the table, “and with long intervals and uncertain dates, I learned from my sister that her condition remained so far unchanged that I almost ceased to remember that she even lived.”

Nothing could be more consistent with the connubial records of the Lefernes. Their forgetfulness, perhaps, might be their plea of “extenuating circumstances.”

“But in the firm, unhesitating, unflinching faith that what was, has been, may be again, Bob,” continued the colonel, “I struggled against the long odds of stern

reality to the inflated bubbles of hope."

"The lesson should have been learnt at less cost." So thought the vicar.

"I felt, as the successful gambler always feels, that I wanted but the means to continue the game to insure the turn of Fortune in my favour."

"The play has been too reckless, and the stakes too high." So thought the vicar.

"Then came the one great chance and ambitious object of my life frustrated by the threats and power of that blood-sucker, Jeremiah Early. Relenting when too late, I won the Derby, and secured a loss; but not greater to me than to him."

"In some mundane matters repentance seems to possess a doubtful reward." So thought the vicar.

"Nothing then remained but to wait for the hour when Aubrey came of age," resumed the colonel, "and Early perceived that his interests in this respect were identi-

cal with mine. Like many a villain of the same kind, he plunged too deeply to extricate himself, and he was compelled to turn to me for help."

"Assistance which might be depended upon as long as it suited your own purposes." So thought the vicar.

"The night at length arrived—as all nights do in their turn, Bob, whether for good or for evil—when our rascally plan for disentailing the property was to be carried out. The result need scarcely be repeated. Consistent with the innate weakness of some of his forefathers, Aubrey had run away with a doll the moment he was his own master, and nothing remained for us but to wait for his return; as back we agreed he must come when his slender means were exhausted."

"That might be deemed a foregone conclusion." So thought the vicar.

"Nothing has been heard of him since,"

continued the colonel, "and, feeling how purposeless the attempt would be to seek him, I have made no inquiries concerning his whereabouts. There is one, however, who, I have little doubt, has been making an active search from that moment to this."

"And that one is Ivy Girling's father." So thought the vicar.

"My object, however, in drawing your attention to these few particulars was to communicate the cause to which I referred as the first which struck terror here," and, as he spoke, the colonel brought the palm of his right hand violently on the left of his breast. "The first," repeated he, "which struck terror here."

The vicar gave a strained look of inquiry, but said not a word.

"As we were about entering my son's chamber," resumed the colonel, and his voice dropped to a low whisper, although each syllable was slowly measured and dis-

tinct, "I saw, as plainly as I now see you, the form and figure of my wife."

A faint smile of incredulity passed over the features of the Rev. Robert Roundhead as he raised his glass and looked at the bee's-wing floating between the light and him.

"I am not surprised at that smile, Bob," added the colonel, "and yet let me entreat you not to class me among the mad. I have thought that at certain seasons, and to serve special purposes, invisible things may become visible."

"If I understand your theory, then," responded the vicar, "the form and figure of your wife which you believe to have seen was spiritual."

"If not a phantom of my own heated imagination," returned the colonel, "it could have been nothing else."

"Being the hobgoblin, I suppose, which is reported to have haunted this old house

for some time past," rejoined the vicar, laughing, "and making an addition to the marvellous and horrible old ghost-stories connected with it throughout long generations."

"There have been strange and unscrupulous deeds perpetrated beneath its roof, Bob," added the colonel, "but few more so, perhaps, than the one I was about to commit, in conjunction with my associate in villainy, on the night and at the hour when my son lost the legal right of protection from thieves. Two were about stealing into his chamber, when, years ago as it is since we met, I recognised the form of Julia Leferne, within a few feet of where we stood, fading away like a shadow in the darkness."

"The vision of a brain disturbed and ill at ease," observed the vicar, sipping his wine.

"It might have been, and probably was," rejoined the colonel; "but as I gazed the

ice of fear for the first time reached my heart, and it remains there still."

"Have you mentioned this to your sister?" inquired the vicar.

"No," replied the colonel, "neither should I think of doing so, unless prepared to hold the rank of being the first coward in the family. Even from her I might meet with well-merited contempt."

"Whatever your active faults or deficiencies may be, Ned," returned the vicar, "rest assured that your courage is unquestioned and unquestionable. At the same time," continued he, "I am glad that you have confided this cause of embarrassment to me alone, for more reasons than are necessary to specify. As, however, its existence, in fact, was impossible, treat it as a vision of the mind's eye—an unreal thing."

"Such has been the argument I have constantly applied in secret with myself," added the colonel, "but to little purpose.

That which I saw was so palpable and real that I cannot remove the impression from my memory."

"Let me assist you by directing your attention to something better," returned the vicar, pushing the lessened magnum towards his friend. "Come, fill your glass, Ned," continued he, cheerfully, "and then we'll try to find a reason fair to fill it once again."

CHAPTER V.

FROM the night that Ivy Girling was missed from her home, a very great change appeared beneath its roof. She was gone—that was all her father knew, and more than he wished to know. He was told by many, who seemed to have heard and seen what was never dreamt of, sleeping or waking, by himself, that the companion in her flight could be no other than his master's son, and the strong man felt but one desire—to clutch Aubrey Leferne by the throat and choke the life from him then and there. It might be murder, but he could do it, and would, let the consequences be what they might, if one chance were given for his fingers to meet.

His daughter—she who had done her best so long to make his home a home to him—had gone, and, if not for ever, it might be, perhaps, as well that it should be so. Still he could not rest. He would revenge the wrong committed at the forfeiture of his life, and he could do no more, but pray that he might clasp her in his arms once again before he died. And then the strong man wept like a little child.

He had earnestly sought an interview with the colonel, but it was peremptorily refused, and the messenger, Mr. Soppy, told not to repeat the request in a manner which admitted of no appeal. The decision must be accepted as final.

“I no more dare ask him again to see ye, Harry,” said he, raising his hands with the palms exposed and the fingers turned back, “than wear a bunch of old Sir Harold Leferne’s daffodils in my button-hole on Easter Sunday.”

The particular reason for objecting to wear the flowers of historical dread on Easter Sunday was not explained; but Mr. Soppo added, with great and marked solemnity, "That he wouldn't, indeed!"

"I should like, then, a few words with Miss Margaret before going," dreamily said the gamekeeper.

"My lady might not refuse to see you, Harry," replied Mr. Soppo. "She can't say no to anyone with a sore heart; but the subject is not altogether a delicate one for a lady to be spoken to about, and I always say, under the most disgusting circumstances, let us be delicate."

Harry Girling stood with a fixed, blinkless stare on the ground at his feet, but said not a word in reply.

"If we are not delicate," resumed Mr. Soppo, "we're not far removed from animals in general, and swine in particular. Above all things be delicate. Such is my sentiments."

“Will you ask her to see me, Tom, before I go?” asked the gamekeeper. “I think she would listen patiently to what I have to say, and it might remove a dead weight here,” and, as he spoke, he pressed the broad, hard palm of his right hand upon his breast.

Mr. Soppo was suddenly seized with a short dry cough, which seemed to interrupt his reply, and afford time for reflection.

“In course,” said he, at the finish of the cough, which bore the effect of a drawn-out effort of the lungs, “you’ll be mild in your remarks to my lady about this little mishap?”

A little mishap! That which had strained his heart-strings to their utmost tension!

Mr. Soppo caught the angry, passionate glance conveying the thought, but considered it expedient to treat it as unnoticed.

“In calling things by soft names instead of strong ones,” continued Mr. Soppo, “it

by no means alters their nature, Harry ; but many hoffences lose much of the high and gamy flavour by treating 'em delicately, and in this particular instance I don't see what good can be expected by anyone from using the rough edge of his tongue."

"If she will see me before I go," rejoined the gamekeeper, "I promise you, Tom, not to say one word to wound her feelings, and she may say something, perhaps, to soften mine."

"Very good," returned Mr. Soppo. "Under those conditions I'll make known your wish to my lady, and see what can be done ; but in saying that you mean to go, Harry, I, as an old friend, should like to know where you are going, and what for?"

"To find out where they are," was the hoarse and husky reply.

"You're more likely to do that by remaining here," added Mr. Soppo. "When tired——"

A groan of mental agony broke from the strong man's lips.

"Of being away," continued Mr. Sippy, blandly, "or when his money is gone—and it's sure to fly fast enough with a Leferne—the young scapegrace will come back again as if nothing had happened, and knowing his own youthful failings at his time of life, and the weakness of the family as long as it has been a family, the colonel will shake hands with him when they meet, in his own polite Hoxford way, and drum a tune at the same time on the table. That's what will happen, Harry—or I'm no prophet—in a very short time."

"But what have you to say about the meeting of my child with me?" asked the father, in a voice so hollow and sad that, whatever feeling of levity might have been entertained by Mr. Sippy, it became stifled on the instant.

"I'd rather leave that to my lady," re-

sponded Mr. Sippy. "She will handle the subject better than I can, and tell ye, perhaps, what to do, and what not to do, which I can't. At the same time," continued he, "my advice is to stay where you are, and make the best of a very unpleasant piece of business."

The best, indeed! What, to let day by day go by, and not to move one step in search of her, however hopeless the search might be? No, he would roam the wide world over, if he could—anything but remain where she had been to remind him of the past.

CHAPTER VI.

THE silver threads of grey hair now outnumbered those of the auburn hue among the still thick and luxuriant tresses of Margaret Leferne, and it was said among the gossips of Greatwood Park that the hand of care had more to do with the bleaching of them than time itself. Be this, however, as it may, she looked as if each day added many to her age since Aubrey's departure; but not a word of reproach concerning him escaped her lips. As she had been throughout her life with the faults and frailties of others, so Aunt Margaret remained—silent and sad. He had left without one word of parting—without a look that

she could remember of regret that in leaving her, perhaps, they might never meet again. But he had gone, and the grief for his absence permitted no reproach for the cause, although she knew full well that it could scarcely fail to scatter the seeds of sorrow to be reaped hereafter. The colonel spoke but little upon the subject. It was lamentable, he said, to think that the family did not improve in its morals and social duties ; but to the examples of evil set by past generations, he supposed, might be attributed a kind of inheritable malady to do wrong whenever the opportunity presented itself. As with the order of nature so things with the Lefernes seemed to move in a circle, and to a reflective mind a vast amount of philosophical interest might be created in the research for what would seem to be certain but erratic causes. He had not given the subject much thought, neither was it his intention so to do ; but the family

rule of wrong seemed to be unexceptional—it never came aright.

Aunt Margaret listened to her brother's argument, which generally conveyed a latent excuse for his own errors of commission and omission, and, if she said nothing in reply, it was from forbearance and consideration towards him, who had scarcely exhibited one sign in return throughout long years of patient trials and self-denial.

“Your very silence,” said he, one evening, as they sat alone in the library, while the shades of evening were darkening around them, “is a reproach to me, Margaret, and yet it is one of the least disagreeable kind. I could not bear to be told of my faults; but to be chided—as I think I am—in your silent thoughts, makes me feel that I must still be deemed a free agent in the universal school of scoundrelism. If I were not, I think you would promptly discover some palliation for my confessed transgressions.”

Margaret Leferne's fingers stole to the cross upon her bosom, and, clasping it there, she whispered an inaudible petition for their forgiveness.

"The large preponderating mass of rascals," continued the colonel, "being foiled with better weapons than their own, generally whine about good intentions, and swear what was done was never meant. Now *I*," said he, commencing a tune on the arm of the chair of a lively and inspiring kind, "admit unreservedly that I never knew a good intention direct a single action of my life. I totally ignore good intentions as the excuse of cowards for their defeat."

"But if we mean well——"

"All mean well," interrupted the colonel, in a hasty tone, "when it suits them. We must be held responsible for our acts, Margaret, without the credit filched for good intentions, and in admitting this I stand confessed of having much to answer for."

“Confession is the first step of a contrite heart towards repentance,” rejoined his sister.

“So the priests tell us,” resumed the colonel. “But, notwithstanding the mortifying disappointments I have met with throughout a somewhat long and remarkably chequered career, I can scarcely state, with a proper regard to the simplicity of truth, that my heart—in its figurative sense—is sorrowful. The last gift in Pandora’s box still remains with me. I am not without hope,” continued he, “that my worldly prospects may yet brighten.”

“Oh, Edward!” exclaimed a voice, and it almost startled him with its earnestness, “let me entreat that you will listen to me.”

“Nothing, my dear sister, will afford me greater pleasure,” rejoined the colonel, recovering from the slight shock; “but pray do me the favour to recollect that my nerves are not quite so strong as they were.”

"Pardon me, if I have given one moment's pain," returned his sister, in a plaintive voice; "but the time appears to have come when I feel that I must speak."

"Not a word of interruption shall be uttered," responded the colonel. "Pray proceed."

A long-drawn sigh was heard, and then a pause followed.

"You must not think, Edward," at length began she, and the words quivered on her lips as she spoke, "that, in recalling to your memory some of the sorrowful events of your life, it is done to reproach you. I have no such purpose."

"Let me tender you my best thanks for that assurance," added the colonel. "I began to suspect that I was about to be inflicted with a prosy discourse on morals, prudence, and Christian virtues."

"The time approaches, Edward," resumed she, in the same tone, and without notic-

ing the reply, "when we must part."

Nothing could be more abrupt than the stoppage of the tune played by his fingers. They remained fixed in one position, as if chiselled from stone.

"So long as the gift to which you have referred," continued Margaret Leferne, mournfully, "is not denied to us—so long as life is not without hope, we may live; but, having no hope, *I* feel that I must die, and that our earthly separation, Edward, is at hand."

The colonel made a strong effort to speak, but it signally failed. With the dying he had never held a discussion, and something told him that the voice now so tenderly addressing him would soon be silent.

"With mingled pride and love, known only to myself," she resumed, "I beheld, in the wayward career of your childhood, what one of the last of the Lefernes would be; but, with a fervent trust, relied that not a

thought or action of his life would be unworthy of his name."

The colonel started, and drew a long breath, as if a sensitive chord had been touched.

"All shall be passed as transient follies, notwithstanding their cost," continued his sister, in a tone that fell gently as she spoke, "until you made her your wife, Edward, who deserved a better fate."

He could say nothing ; for the truth was being spoken, and by one whom he knew had loved him best and longest.

"On the returning morn of the first year of her bridal day," resumed Aunt Margaret, "you well remember the scene which led to the consequences a few hours later. She was a mother ; but the eyes of a maniac gazed unconsciously upon her child."

The pages turned back in the history of his life, grated harshly on the ear of the listener ; but, if impatient with the nar-

rative, his fingers remained motionless.

“The quarrel between you,” continued his sister, in a voice scarcely above an audible whisper, and yet each word fell distinctly on his ear, “was the first and the last.”

The colonel sat, gazing mutely, in the thickening darkness, at the speaker, and he seemed to breathe with difficulty as he listened.

“Years fled by,” resumed Aunt Margaret, “and for anything that appeared on your part, Edward, either by word or deed, she might have been thought never to have been your wife. If not forgotten, you at least made no pretence of remembering her.”

“I complied,” responded the colonel, hoarsely, “with the best advice I could obtain.”

“In sending her away to France, and there left forsaken to pine among the wretched or die friendless and alone. Was that, Edward, the treatment which the mother

of your child should have received at your hands when their rough grasp snatched the power of reason from her brain?"

Not a syllable was spoken in reply.

"On what she hoped to be the happiest day of her young life," continued Aunt Margaret, "sorrow drove her mad, and, as she was driven, so was she left. From that moment to this you have never seen her."

"I sometimes think that I have," rejoined the colonel, in a husky tone.

"When and where?" almost gasped Margaret Leferne.

"It was strange—most strange and inexplicable—that it should be so," responded the colonel, drawing a hand slowly across his forehead; "but on the night that Aubrey came of age, and at the very moment we were about entering his chamber to despoil him of his birthright, the form of my wife, as clear and palpable as when we last parted long years before, flitted like a spectre in the

gallery beyond. I saw her pale and bloodless face as I now see yours, and the look which met mine was more of grief than of anger."

"Poor Julia!" exclaimed his sister. "Her sorrow commenced suddenly; but has lasted long."

"I know," continued the colonel, "what a morbid brain or excited imagination can do in producing shades of the dead and duplicates of the living, but could scarcely have thought that anything could have been so real, less than reality itself."

"Did this disturbing cause, be it what it might," inquired Aunt Margaret, "appear again?"

"But once," replied the colonel. "One night, and not long since, I awoke suddenly, and in a slanting, bright ray of moonlight saw a figure, which I recognized in a moment as that of my wife, standing within a few feet of my bedside, with a forefinger

raised and pressed across her lips. I almost fancied that I heard it whisper, 'Hush.' "

Aunt Margaret's lips moved as if saying something to herself ; but not a sound escaped them.

"I am no coward," continued he, "and not one of our name was ever suspected of knowing what fear is ; but as I gazed at the object, and felt that her eyes were fixed on mine, a feeling stole over me that seemed to prostrate body and thought. I could do nothing, but remained staring and motionless as if paralyzed at what I saw."

"Did this vision continue long?" asked his sister.

"It appeared to me," resumed the colonel, "so long as to freeze the blood within my veins."

"Conscience makes cowards of the bravest," rejoined Aunt Margaret ; "but let us not talk of spectres. The stern and sad realities of life demand our attention, and it

is of these that I would now speak to you. As I have said, Edward, our earthly separation is at hand."

The colonel's fingers had begun to beat a noiseless air; but they remained stationary and in a fixed attitude as the last syllable was expressed.

"Why should you say this to me?" he asked, in a tremulous voice.

"Because," she replied, looking earnestly in his face, "it is true. As I speak, Edward, I conjure you to listen to the words—if not the last—of the dying."

He stared with blinkless eyelids at the speaker, but said nothing, and his fingers remained in the same attitude as if prepared to drum a tune unknown to himself.

"Whether right or wrong for what I have done," resumed Aunt Margaret, "is scarcely, perhaps, a question to be raised at a moment like this. Judging, however, of the future by the past, I now tell you, Edward,

that, did I not feel that my secret must be revealed with my death, it should still be kept."

"What secret?" asked he, hoarsely.

"One that has hastened that end," she replied, sorrowfully, "which no one has less cause to regret than myself."

His fixed look remained; but he said nothing in reply.

"You once loved your wife?" said his sister, plaintively.

The colonel waved a hand mechanically as a signal which might be received either affirmatively or the reverse.

"And she is the afflicted mother of your son!"

A quickly lowering frown knitted his brow as he replied,

"Which, perhaps, may account for the forgetfulness of his duty to his father."

"Oh, say not that!" exclaimed Aunt Margaret, raising her hands beseechingly.

“Think, for one moment, what your loving duty was towards them, and whether you have performed it.”

“I have not the patience to be catechised,” responded he, with ill concealed anger.

“What of this secret?”

“I fear, Edward Leferne,” rejoined his sister, rising with difficulty from her seat, and standing before him like one possessed of a power of control which she had never felt before, “I fear, Edward Leferne,” repeated she, “that this is not the moment to reveal it, although my fleeting moments are numbered.”

“Tell me——”

“Not now,” she interrupted, with a sorrowful shake of her head. “To-morrow, Edward ; we will speak of this to-morrow,” and with tearful eyes bent on his she slowly quitted the room.

CHAPTER VII.

LITTLE MITE—still barely sinking the scale to “three stun five”—had received limited leave of absence from his onerous stable duties at Newmarket, and was now a guest of Samuel Wideo at the dairy, Bromley Marsh. Johnny Tadpole was also a guest, the time being Christmas when the holly berries were popularly supposed to be red and plum-puddings in course of preparation. As a matter of fact, without the slightest alloy of fiction or colour of romance, Johnny’s weight now made an abrupt and decided movement of the beam with “five stun three” only as a counter-balance, and this was endeavoured to be

accounted for by William Bottles—also a guest at this festive season—“by laying on too much flesh in certain parts.”

“There’s a good deal to be said about training,” said William Bottles, “and there isn’t one man in a hundred knows anything about it. I do, I do *so*.”

“I should say,” remarked little Mite, with becoming modesty, as he sedulously scraped the rind from a small piece of cheese, designed as a relish to his supper, “that Mister Mark Rookson knows something about it.”

“In keeping you down to your lowest riding weight, Mite,” replied William Bottles, “he certainly shows that he knows a branch of his business. But let us turn our eyes in this direction,” continued he, waving a hand where Johnny Tadpole occupied a chair, with the whole of his countenance hidden, through the medium of a pewter pot, from which he was endeavouring to extract the

last few drops of cooper, "and we may begin to doubt whether he knows more than a branch. We may *so*."

Johnny Tadpole, feeling himself instinctively the object of this severe observation, slowly withdrew the capacious pewter pot from his countenance, and, gently permitting it to descend on the table before him, the effect was not altogether dissimilar to the moon emerging from opaque darkness.

"Was you speaking about me, sir?" said Johnny, with a hectic flush on his features.

"Yes, I were, Taddy," replied William Bottles. "I were speaking about you, Taddy. I were *so*."

"In what partickler?" asked Johnny, in a tone demonstrative of great indignation.

"Softly, Taddy," returned Samuel Wideo, in the most conciliatory manner that could be adopted by the most earnest of peacemakers. "Softly, Taddy," repeated he. "Let's hear what Billy has to say."

"Let him say what he likes," grumbled Johnny, "I'm a feather still."

"Light enough, here and there," rejoined William Bottles, moving a hand as if putting a fine edge on the blade of a razor, "but too heavy in parts."

"Parts!" repeated Johnny Tadpole, knitting his brow angrily. "What parts?"

Samuel Wideo, however, perceiving the rugged course that things were taking, seemed to think the time had arrived for an attempt at a treaty of peace, and to proffer his good offices.

"Come, come, Taddy," said he, with the beneficent object of smoothing the way, "don't quarrel about trifles."

"I wasn't, sir," returned Johnny, with more energy than can be easily be described. "I was standing up for my parts."

"I like man or boy to show plenty of pluck," added Samuel Wideo, airing himself now with his back turned towards a fire

which, from his uneasy movements, seemed to scorch that portion of his frame which might be called his "reverse." "I like man or boy," repeated he, "to show plenty of pluck in defending himself or his friend; but, where no offence is meant, none should be felt."

"Well done, Sam," ejaculated William Bottles. "Spoken like a bishop! All I meant to say, Taddy," continued he, "was that, while you were the Unknown's lad at the Heather House stable, you put on a trifle too much flesh in parts. You did *so*."

Johnny's head swayed to and fro in a manner not to be mistaken for unquestionable dissent to this proposition.

"It's well known," resumed William Bottles, "that the boys in that stable get more beef and plum-pudding than is good for the light weights, if they want to rise and be called fashionable."

"Mister Rookson don't cram 'em, sir,"

remarked Johnny, in a tone denoting that he was having the best of the argument, or would have it presently.

"I didn't say he did," added William Bottles. "But where is the boy, sharp-set, that would turn away from roast beef and plum-pudding? Show *me* that boy, Taddy, and I shall at once look to *his* shoulders for wings. I shall *so*."

"We certainly live like fighting bantams," observed little Mite, parenthetically.

Johnny Tadpole, being over sensitive with the subject under discussion, felt that Mite was taking the opposite side, and suggested, in a voice of an acid and biting kind, that "he would speak for himself."

"In the *we* he did speak for himself as well as others," said Samuel Wideo. "There was nothing wrong in that, Taddy."

"Some lads, like some osses," resumed William Bottles, "can't be kept on full allowance without rattling work, if they're

to be light, strong, and fit for anything. Now, what I mean to say is that Johnny Tadpole has either had too much grub or too little work, and if that's first-rate training I should like to know what's called bad."

"Would you have the setting muzzle kept on every day in the week, Sundays included, to keep a poor little boy below fair riding weight?" asked Johnny Tadpole, commiserating poor little boys in general and himself in particular.

"Yes, I would," replied William Bottles, without the slightest prevarication. "You can't starve osses into condition; but you can boys, and when a trainer's got a promising feather weight in his stable, with head, hands, and heels, it's a duty he owes himself, the lad, and his country, to keep his flesh down by stratagem if he can, and by force if he can't. Professionals know—and only professionals," continued he,

addressing Samuel Wideo, "what may be got out of a feather when acknowledged to be fashionable, and he's only profitable so long as he's light. Starve him, if necessary, *I* say. *I* do *so*."

"I don't think he ought to be drawn too fine, Billy," observed Samuel Wideo, with a touch of humanity dictating the suggestion.

"I do," rejoined William Bottles. "I'd draw him as fine as wire."

Mite began to think that if subjected to this process of wasting there would soon be nothing left of his corporeal substance, and wondered where he should be when, taking nothing from nothing, nothing remained.

"In drawing the scale down a pound or two more when I left the Heather House stable than when I entered it," observed Johnny Tadpole, still with a gloomy brow and dissatisfied air, "speaks well, I think, for the treatment I met with."

"For the treatment, I admit," argued

William Bottles; "but not the training. You put on too much flesh, Taddy, in parts. You did *so*."

"Well, well!" ejaculated Samuel Wideo, "let's drop the subject. Taddy's right enough in weight for his age, and, perhaps, we may all here see him wearing the purple jacket and orange cap in front at the finish of a great race before he's much older."

A flush of pardonable pride spread itself over Johnny's features at the conclusion of this remark, and his eyes became fixed admiringly on the faded and time-worn Leferne colours still hanging in their old place on the wall opposite to where he sat.

"If I really believed it would ever be my turn to do that, sir," responded Johnny Tadpole, "I think I should drop down on the floor, curled up in a heap of joy."

"There are more unlikely things to hap-

pen," said Samuel Wideo, "I can tell ye."

"To be sure there are," rejoined William Bottles, with a decided tendency to sarcasm in his tone and manner. "For instance," continued he, "it's more unlikely that Taddy will forget what the training of a feather ought to be on Christmas day—tomorrow being that auspicious occasion—than remember that roast beef can't lessen the weight in those parts which are now too heavy."

"Bother my parts!" irritably exclaimed Johnny Tadpole. "I wish I had none."

"Taddy, Taddy!" reprovingly said Samuel Wideo, with an admonishing shake of the head. "Don't call a judgment down upon your head. A flash of lightning might——"

The sentence being left unfinished, William Bottles illustrated the conclusion by blowing the ends of the fingers of one of his hands with great force, but said not a syllable of an audible kind.

It was now little Mite's turn—as he thought—to vindicate the cause of the feathers, and, in a voice slightly tremulous with emotion, ventured to convey the hope that “not one would be scorched or blown away, so long as he did his duty to his stable.”

“Hear! hear!” shouted William Bottles, with strongly-displayed enthusiasm. “I like good boys, being, I suppose, too rare to be seen very often. What do you say, Sam?”

“As to boys?” curtly inquired the dairy-man.

William Bottles gave a signal in the affirmative.

“Then, looking at boys, as I do at spar-rers, that is in numbers,” rejoined Samuel Wideo, “I can't say I admire 'em much. At the same time,” continued he, making a significant gesture with a pointed finger to the immediate positions occupied by Messrs. Mite and Tadpole, “there *are* boys, per-

haps, that won't live to be hanged or have penal servitude for life."

"The laws of the present day being more merciful than just," added William Bottles, rolling the end of his tongue into a cheek, and looking out of the extreme corners of his eyes at the downcast and modest countenances of Messrs. Mite and Tadpole, who felt themselves aggrieved, but said no more that night upon the personal subject of "feathers."

CHAPTER VIII.

SIR HAROLD LEFERNE'S daffodils were once more in full bloom, and their golden heads waved in the pale sunshine of early spring, as they had done since that false-sworn knight planted them with his knightly hand for a lasting remembrance, as it would appear, of his broken vow. The panegyric on his tomb became less legible as time went on, but the daffodils were as fresh and bright as at their first appearance in Greatwood Park long centuries ago. "Dust to dust, ashes to ashes," but not so with the daffodils.

In accordance with the instructions he had received—he rather objected to "orders"

—Mr. Sippy—Mr. Thomas Sippy—placed a chair, with its back to the wind, opposite the bed of daffodils, and after examining the position with minute care, as if anxious for the instructions to have been carried out strictly to the letter, turned upon his heel and quitted the spot in silence, but not altogether devoid of pomp and circumstance.

Soon after his departure Colonel Leferne might have been seen approaching slowly, as he leant more heavily than usual upon his cane, and the supporting arm of the Rev. Robert Roundhead.

Dropping almost helplessly into the seat, the colonel drew a long breath, as if unequal to the exertion he had undergone.

“You will feel better now,” observed his companion.

“I hope to breathe here, Bob,” replied the colonel, “but felt suffocated within the house, and, if my wishes are consulted, I

shall breathe a little while longer. I want to meet my son again."

"If I only knew——"

"You know enough," interrupted the colonel. "I must be as patient as I can, and wait—if life remains—for his return. If dead, Bob, tell him that his father forgave him nothing, for he had nothing to forgive."

"He will not think so," replied the vicar, "in the calm moments of reflection."

"Whoever heard of a Leferne having calm moments of reflection?" asked the colonel, with a slight, inward, and scarcely audible laugh. "Did you ever know me to have one?"

The Rev. Robert Roundhead was perhaps opportunely attacked with a short, dry cough, and placed a hand upon his lips.

"We," continued the colonel, "whose motto is to 'live with will unfettered,'

must not turn back the pages of life's history. Our race having lived each for himself, Aubrey has carried out the example only set by his ancestors."

"And yet, Ned, I have known you to feel what family pride is," returned his companion, "let the objections raised to its fame be what they may."

"You apply a mild term," added the colonel, "in saying 'objections,' for which, I fear, the more potent one of selfish rascality might be substituted with greater justice. You are right, however, in stating that, in spite of all that may be thought, said, or written against the rectitude of our family, and its total disregard for the moral code by which the artificial state of society permits itself to be governed, my vanity is gratified at the bare thought that I am one of them. I would be, had I the choice, neither more nor less than a Leferne."

"The name, at least," said the Rev.

Robert Roundhead, "is conspicuous for its brave deeds."

"Ay, Bob," responded the colonel, as a red glow lighted up his features, "you have thrummed the right chord. The old blood never blanched before an enemy. Our bitterest detractors must call us bold, if not innocent."

There was now a pause of some duration which neither seemed disposed to break. At length, however, the vicar, appearing to feel it awkward, remarked,

"In bringing me here, Ned, I think you wished to speak upon a special subject."

"For once in my life, at least," replied the colonel, "the subject will be a serious one, and I chose this spot purposely to discuss it—opposite Sir Harold's daffodils, which come and go, die and appear again. What is life, Bob?"

The unexpected and somewhat abrupt question seemed to take the colonel's com-

panion so much by surprise that he did nothing but continue to look in mute silence at the questioner.

"I am not disposed, you had better understand," continued the colonel, "before introducing it, to listen to platitudes from the pulpit, or quotations from the most erudite works on theology. I want to learn, if I can, from you, while I possess the mysterious gift, what is life in its reality?"

"The active condition of the physical and mental organs seems to me," replied the Rev. Robert Roundhead, "about as plain and simple an answer as I could give."

"Through what agency?" asked the colonel.

"You object to my referring to the generally accepted authorities on this point?" said the vicar.

"In giving me one," responded the colonel, "I might probably bring forward another to controvert it. Let me have

your own definition, Bob, of what life is."

The Rev. Robert Roundhead cleared his voice, and thus began :

"The subject is replete with interest, resolving itself into a problem beyond the finite reasoning of man to solve, and yet it seems to me that, in both holy and pagan history, we possess an inkling of the truth. When man was created, it is written that 'the breath of life was breathed into his nostrils,' showing conclusively that the power of animation was given direct from his Maker. The living power of man is also attributed by the heathen to the fire stolen from heaven by Prometheus, and the sources of both allegations may be, and, I think, are, one and the same. The conventional expression of the vital spark having fled, so often used in describing the latest moment of existence, is an additional support, however unconsciously given, of the truth of the theory that life in its reality is

vital heat bestowed in accordance with the unerring laws of Nature, governed and regulated by them, and its influence ceasing only when the circle of its current in which it moves stops, and the machine moves no more."

"I like the argument," remarked the colonel, with his eyes fixed thoughtfully on the ground before him. "It sounds rational, Bob. Let me have a continuation of this strange philosophy. The allegation on your part is that something has quitted the machine when it stops, no matter the name by which it is called or known. What becomes of it?"

"Ay," responded his companion, "there is the impenetrable mystery, the great secret! That a force which directed the physical organization, and gave to the marvellous nervous system sensation, thought, volition, and will has left the body, with the last beat of the pulse, no one can doubt for a

single moment. It is apparent to our senses. When life ceases, call it by what we may, something real but unsubstantial has fled. Who can say where?"

"Your question is the one I want answered," rejoined the colonel. "As everything we see and touch around us is under the influence of fixed and certain laws, why should not the shadowy and unsubstantial? I began to think that, as the old material—or matter, as you philosophers call it—is worked up afresh, varying in shape and appearance, and producing different effects, so may the heat, force, or power which directed it when a tenant of the frame. Seeing, as we do, that traits of character are often hereditary, I am far from being convinced that we are more responsible for our sins and transgressions than the particular form in height, width, or depth of our bodies."

"We are taught——"

“To be all outside,” interrupted the colonel, “and a few look conspicuously good. That, however,” continued he, with a slight, inward laugh, “may be traced to their not having been found out. For it’s my opinion, Bob—putting entirely on one side the finding out part of the business—that the distinction is very small between the bad and the good.”

“As a polemic,” replied the vicar, “I could almost congratulate you.”

“For speaking the truth,” rejoined the colonel, “although not in a conventional fashion?”

At this moment a third shadow was thrown from an approaching figure in front of the bed of daffodils, and the colonel asked, without turning his head,

“Who is that?”

Before the question could receive a reply, a haggard, worn, and desperate-looking man stepped from behind the colonel’s

chair, and stood, with compressed lips and silent revenge depicted in every lineament of his features, glaring savagely at him.

The stern, haughty, and blinkless look, however, which was returned, seemed to make the stranger's eyelids droop, and the effect was not altogether lost upon Colonel Leferne.

"Who gave you permission to intrude yourself upon me?" said he, in a tone which corresponded with his look.

"No one," replied Ivy's father; for it was he, although so changed that even his own child—she who had done her best so long to make his home happy—might have passed him as one unknown to her. "No one," repeated he, "but I have been a long way, sir, to no purpose. I cannot find her."

"And this you seem to deplore," rejoined the colonel, with the steady, unflinching gaze still bent upon Harry Girling, who appeared to cower beneath it. "My opinion

is that you may be congratulated on the result."

"Why?" was the harsh and passionate demand.

Colonel Leferne's two fingers were raised, and the gamekeeper, from a long-practised habit, perhaps, became silent at the signal, although the expression of his countenance was anything but calm.

"Because you might have found one, also, that *I* wait for," was the calm and collected reply.

"If I had," rejoined Ivy's father, and the words were muttered between his lips, locked closely together, "you might have waited to the last moment of your life, sir, however long—but he never would have come."

"The inference is plain," added the colonel, turning to the vicar, "and I cannot be expected to listen to anything so revolting as deliberately planned murder. Rid

me of this fellow's presence, for I am not equal to the exertion myself."

"You had better leave," said the vicar, in a conciliatory tone and manner. "No possible good can arise from any discussion on this most painful subject."

"And is this all that is to be said to me before I go?" mournfully inquired Harry Girling.

"What more do you expect?" asked the colonel, "after your expressed intention of committing murder had a favourable opportunity presented itself?"

"I meant what I said," responded Ivy's father, with unquestionable sincerity in his words. "Your son would never have returned."

"He forgets, or, perhaps, never knew," returned the colonel, addressing the vicar, "of some of the most interesting episodes in the lives of those who bore our name when dolls seem to have been the exciting

cause. There have been—if we may place confidence in their annals—both red and ready hands, and it would appear, sometimes, that the first raised was the first to fall.”

Again the ominous words were uttered.

“Your son would never have returned.”

“If history repeats itself,” observed the colonel, as if the words were merely the unconscious expression of his own thoughts, “he will come back when his doll ceases to prove attractive. It has always been so, and, until the toy is thrown aside, no argument prevails. Beauty fades with time, and a Leferne sees none in decay.”

“I came not here, sir,” said Ivy’s father, and his voice quivered as he spoke, “to give offence, but to ask if you can lighten the load at my heart by telling me something of my child?”

The colonel’s eyes were fixed thoughtfully on the daffodils; but he said nothing in reply.

“I have travelled far in search of her,” continued he, “and could go no further. Day and night have I wandered in the hope that I might hear, perhaps, where she might be found; but all proved useless, and I am here only to ask, sir, your pity for my sorrow.”

As rigid as if carved from stone, Colonel Leferne sat gazing in silence at the daffodils.

“Pity!” at length ejaculated the colonel, “I never knew its meaning. But, whatever may be its worth at my hands, consider that you receive it, and go from my presence.”

“May I ask, sir, if you know anything of my daughter that you can tell me?” asked Ivy’s father, without the faintest trace left of his feelings when he first appeared; for he now stood before one who controlled him with a look.

“Nothing,” curtly responded the colonel. “I await my son’s return, being informed

of no movements of his from the moment he left until this."

"Have I your leave, sir, to go to my cottage again for one night?" inquired Harry Girling, and if the tears did not fall from his eyes they floated in them.

"Yes," replied the colonel, waving a hand impatiently. "So long as you leave me, go where it pleases you most. I care not where."

Without further remark Ivy's father slowly quitted the presence of Colonel Leferne, who, as soon as the gamekeeper had left, observed, "That philosopher was not far from right who called the attention of mankind to the fact that the wrongs and misfortunes of others are remembered with a degree of satisfaction—if not with pleasure—that they are not our own. Now, that fellow," continued he, "only thinks of the loss of his daughter, and neither knows nor cares of the ruinous effects which her

doll-like charms have produced upon my broken fortunes. It is a selfish world, Bob. Give me your arm," and as they came towards the bed of daffodils so they departed from it.

CHAPTER IX.

THE parrot at "The Greyhound," having proved to be a true prophet, was regarded at Newmarket as a very rare bird, and one in which unreserved confidence might be reposed. Having repeatedly expressed the opinion, and held it to the last, that "the colonel would win the Derby," she had won for herself the distinction of being an oracle which might be consulted in full reliance of its being—in accordance with the description of Jacket and Gaiters, who still frequented the bar—"the right tip." From some cause, however, known only to herself, she became remarkably silent after the consummation of

her prophecy, and, with one eye closely shut, peered through the bars of her cage with the other in a way which proved somewhat tantalizing to the expectant beholder.

“Come, I say,” exclaimed Jacket and Gaiters, as he stood before the bar using every kind of blandishment to prevail upon the dumb bird to speak, “what’s the matter with ye?”

“It’s my opinion,” replied the gentleman behind the bar, in a light, airy costume, of which the sleeves of his shirt, and a small white apron, formed conspicuous but separate portions, “it’s my opinion,” repeated he, in the act of drawing a pint of old mixed, “that our parrot isn’t to be fiddled.”

“Who wants to fiddle her?” inquired Jacket and Gaiters, in a strong tone of powerful indignation.

“I don’t say you do,” rejoined the gentleman behind the bar, dexterously blowing the head off the pint of old mixed,

in order to see that the measure was fair; "but some does."

"Well, whether I don't and t'others do," returned Jacket and Gaiters, "it seems all the same. The old devil remains as dumb as a post."

"She'll speak again some day," said the gentleman behind the bar, "when she's had time to think a bit longer. Our parrot is not to be fiddled."

Again the gentleman before the bar seemed to feel that his honour had been impugned, and wished to be distinctly understood by the gentleman behind the bar that the intention of "fiddling" was as remote from his mind as any supposed distance in infinite space.

"All I ax is," said Jacket and Gaiters, "what she's got to say about the Great Match?"

"*I* should like to know that," replied the gentleman behind the bar, with a grin,

“quite as soon as you. It’s no use trying to get on when all the books are full.”

“You’d then back the parrot’s tip?” said Jacket and Gaiters.

“Let me have the first chance,” responded the gentleman behind the bar, “and I’ll put it down like a man who expects to take it up again. They’ll see no flinching in me.”

“It’s wonderful,” returned Jacket and Gaiters, with a long-drawn sigh, “how people will follow a parrot’s tip. I back it.”

At this moment the bird particularly referred to gave a vigorous shake of her feathers, and with her head placed at an acute angle, and an eye screwed close, seemed to convey the impression that she was not to be “fiddled,” whatever might be thought or said of her.

“When the bookmakers,” observed the gentleman behind the bar, “thought the

Unknown was a dead-un, how she stuck to it that he would win."

"I began to fear that all my sugar was in the melting pot," returned Jacket and Gaiters, "it looked as if he was as safe not long before the start as cat's meat. But that's all over," continued he, "the losings paid or owing, and the winnings spent. What we want to know is something about the Great Match. Come, Polly, what's your tip?"

Again the reticent bird shook her feathers, and with one eye open, and the other shut, peeped through the bars of her cage in a manner which seemed to say, "Here is one that's not to be fiddled."

"She's never spoken a word about racing since the Derby," remarked the gentleman behind the bar, "although," continued he, dropping his voice a full octave, "I believe she swears to herself night and day."

“What a d—d old reptile she must be!” exclaimed Jacket and Gaiters.

“Not a bad sort, either,” replied the gentleman behind the bar; “only she’s not made up her mind about the Great Match, and she’s a-thinking.”

At this juncture the object of discourse made known that one thought at least should no longer be concealed, and she forthwith expressed it by announcing that the gentleman behind the bar was not to be trusted in a strictly moral point of view.

“She had you there!” said Jacket and Gaiters, in great glee, as he dived both hands into the bottom of his breeches pockets. “She had you there!” repeated he.

“And you’re another,” added the hitherto silent bird, with a shake which dispossessed her permanently of a few of her feathers.

It was now the turn of the gentleman behind the bar.

“We’re both alike, you hear,” said he, with a laugh which expressed much personal satisfaction. “I don’t care so long as I’m not alone among bad company. Give *me* a pal and I’m ’appy.”

“There’s something in that,” replied Jacket and Gaiters, reflectively. “If I was a-going to be scragged, I should like to be strung up with a pal at my side, and if so be my back was a-going to be scratched by a dozen or two of the cat, I should say, as a matter of choice, let my best friend take a full share with me. It would lessen my pain, I think, to know that he got a dollop as well.”

At this moment, and for a third time, the parrot shook her feathers, and, raising a foot, gave the top of her head a rub which displayed more violence than tenderness in its action.

“That’s the way she polishes up her thoughts,” observed the gentleman behind

the bar, "before talking more sense sometimes than most men."

"P'raps she a-going to give us the tip about the Great Match," replied Jacket and Gaiters. "Now, Polly, what is it?"

But Polly seemed, as yet, not in the humour to speak, and merely looked in silence at her interrogator with one eye fixed steadily upon him.

"It's no use trying to fiddle one word out of her," rejoined the gentleman behind the bar. "We must wait until she's ready."

"Our oss is getting ready," returned Jacket and Gaiters, folding his arms deliberately across the front of his shirt, and widening the position of his legs before the bar like a pair of stretched out compasses. "I saw him," continued he, with the most profound admiration as the vision again appeared in his mind's eye, "take a pipe-opener this morning over the Rowley Mile, and he went like a meteor."

“It will be a great match!” exclaimed the gentleman behind the bar. “But it’s asking the Unknown to do a marvellous thing to give a year to such a stayer as Belted Will over the Beacon Course.”

“He’ll do it,” confidently responded Jacket and Gaiters, “and easy, too.”

“Will he?” returned somebody or something, in a thick, guttural voice, and, to the great dismay of the gentlemen both before and behind the bar, the foreboding monosyllables seemed to come from inside the bars of the parrot’s cage.

“Was that Polly?” asked Jacket and Gaiters, looking, as he felt, anything but gratified at the inferred doubt which the question raised.

“I think it was,” replied the gentleman behind the bar between hope and dread; but the latter emotion prevailed, or the tone and manner did not portray the dominant sentiment.

"It'll be a great match," said the bird, repeating the precise words of the gentleman behind the bar as she winked at Jacket and Gaiters.

"And the Unknown will win in a walk," exclaimed Jacket and Gaiters, "as a first-class, unbeaten race-oss should win!"

"Will he?" responded the parrot. "Will he?"

"I begin to think," remarked the gentleman behind the bar, with a feeling of unconscious dread stealing over him, "that she's not cock-sure that he *will* win in a walk."

"Let us say in a canter, then," suggested Jacket and Gaiters, by way of amendment.

"Will he?" again echoed the parrot, and the one eye that was opened seemed to twinkle as she spoke.

"Belted Will," continued Jacket and Gaiters, still dwelling on the subject of so much interest to himself, "is a rare sticker

over a distance, and may make a fight of it on the post by a short head."

"Will he?" reiterated the parrot. "Will he?"

"This takes some of the confidence out of me," remarked Jacket and Gaiters, gloomily. "I don't quite like it."

"Nor I either," responded the gentleman behind the bar, with corresponding depression. "It doesn't sound musical to my ears."

"But what can she know about it?" sneered Jacket and Gaiters. "We ought to feel ashamed of ourselves for listening to a parrot."

"You wouldn't have said so," replied the gentleman behind the bar, "if she'd spoken as you wished."

"There's a good deal in that," rejoined Jacket and Gaiters. "But, after all, what can a parrot know about the Great Match that's to come off between the Unknown and Belted Will?"

“The Colonel ’ll——” but the bird left the sentence unfinished, and, nestling her head under a wing, the gentleman behind the bar and his companion remained to cogitate undisturbed upon the mysterious future anent—“the Great Match.”

CHAPTER X.

THE Unknown had fulfilled his two engagements to the intense satisfaction of those who had practically and substantially supported their ardent opinions that he would win them. As a Newmarket horse, the inhabitants of Newmarket—including the parrot—were strong and loud in their praise of Queen Mary's son, and expressed their belief that "weight for age nothing in training could beat him over a severe course." Many and general were the sanguine hopes entertained on the part and behalf of the inhabitants of Newmarket that the hypothetical accomplishment might become a matter of record, or the myth

dispelled by a less glorious enrollment.

The colonel had been in his time so great a sportsman, and was still so popular, that, although the owner of but a single horse in training, the eyes of Newmarket were drawn to a focus, and fixed in a blinkless gaze upon him. The colonel had been in his time the best matchmaker that Newmarket had ever known, and, whether before dinner or after, seldom made a mistake in accepting with a weight which won; it being confessed that the race lies always in the scales. The colonel had been in his time invincible, and Newmarket desired a proof that he retained some of the form of other days.

It was not long, after the excitement reached a culminating high pitch, that Newmarket was kept in the torture of suspense. Rumours had been circulated that a challenge had been sent by a great stable in the north to match Belted Will, "one of the best cup horses of the present century," so the

oracles of the Turf averred, against the Unknown over his own distance. In the ordinary course of mundane events, these rumours, being left uncontradicted, strengthened with age until it was generally acknowledged, as a fact in anticipation, that these "cracks of the north and south" would meet as rivals for the double first-class honour to decide which was the best of the two. Then followed by way of climax the public announcement of the conditions of the race, which set at rest all doubt, if any remained, upon the subject:—"Houghton Meeting. Match, £1,000, Beacon Course. The Unknown, 4 years old, 8st. 7lb, Belted Will, 5 years old, 8st. 7lb."

There was now but one topic of absorbing public interest at Newmarket. Men and lads of all weights, from welter to feather, spoke, thought, and dreamt of nothing but the Great Match. The opposed horses representing antagonistic interests, it is need-

less to add that opinions clashed with pardonable violence concerning the probable result, and those of the north and south were apparently as wide asunder as the poles themselves. Upon one point, however, all seemed united, and that was that, taking into consideration the relative merits of each, it was asking the Unknown to "do a great thing to give a year to Belted Will over the Beacon Course." All the weights, feather and welter, at Newmarket were agreed as to this, and no opposition was offered by the most interested concerning the herculean nature of the task assigned to Colonel Leferne's single horse in training.

Mark Rookson, in the scarcely enviable capacity of trainer, had known, from long experience, what the responsibility meant of having a great public favourite under his immediate charge; but never did the full weight sit more heavily on his shoulders than as the day approached for the decision

of the Great Match. The Unknown was doing as well as he could wish, and he entertained little fear of enemies without or enemies within. The strict discipline and watchfulness of the Heath House stable was such as to leave but the bare possible chance of treachery proving successful in the most cunning guise it could assume.

“It must be a near thing,” soliloquized Mark Rookson, turning over the pages of the *Racing Calendar*, a work of reference, which he had frequently to consult, “and I wish I could think it would not be quite so close. The one a four-year-old and the other five, at even weights over the Beacon Course. It is asking our horse to do too much; but still I think,” continued he, after a short reflective pause, “that he will do it. Looking at what the north country horse has done,” continued he, again glancing at the volume before him, “and knowing what ours can do, I believe there are not more

than three pounds between them ; but that the difference is on our side. Over such a course, however, this is too small to depend upon for anything like a certainty, and I wish the colonel had not drawn it quite so fine for his own sake, and"—the speaker stopped short in his speech, and then added—"mine."

A timid if not modest knock was now heard at the door of the apartment in which Mark Rookson was sitting, and permission being given for the visitor to make his or her appearance, as the case might be, William Bottles entered without further announcement, and stood in an uneasy position, with a look of grave doubt as to whether he was a welcome visitor or not.

"Oh ! Mister Bottles," exclaimed Mark Rookson, in a voice and manner which scarcely displayed a gush of joy at seeing his visitor, "is that you ?"

William Bottles, nervously and uncon-

sciously rubbing his hat the wrong way, replied that "he was the identical individual referred to. He was *so*."

"And to what am I indebted for this somewhat early morning call?" rejoined Mark Rookson, closing the volume before him in a deliberate, methodical way, crossing one leg over the other, and gently subsiding backwards in the easy-chair in which he was sitting. "And to what am I indebted for this somewhat early morning call?" repeated he, bending a look upon William Bottles which seemed to do anything but add to the strength of his temporary want of self-confidence.

William Bottles coughed as if something in his throat threatened to strangle him, applied a bent elbow by way of a brush to his hat, which began to look the picture of illustrated misery, and, in an uncertain voice, essayed to give a reply, but failed as the first syllable died still-born upon his lips.

Without lifting his eyes from his much-injured hat, William Bottles felt that the disturbing look was still fixed upon him, and he remained dumb under its influence.

“You have something to say,” encouragingly observed Mark Rookson. “What is it?”

The obstructing impediment to William Bottles’ powers of speech seemed now to be removed, and he left off brushing his hat the wrong way.

“I wanted to speak to you, sir,” began he, but with marked hesitation in his manner, “about the Great Match.”

“Well?” briefly returned Mark Rookson.

Billy Bottles began to feel the choking sensation in his throat again, but managed to swallow it with an effort which partook of a spasm.

“We all know what it must be to the colonel if the Unknown loses, sir,” resumed he. “There won’t be a button left upon

his last shirt, to say nothing of what must become of the only shirt belonging to me."

Mark Rookson entertained a reserved opinion that the interest of the speaker was quite as great in the article of linen mentioned as his own personal property as the buttonless shirt of Colonel Leferne.

"Admitting your statement to be true," responded the Unknown's trainer, "what then?"

"The plunging has been awful on this event, sir," rejoined William Bottles, in a tone approaching the solemn, "and, to say nothing of the colonel and his party, the only question to be settled is which is to be broke, the north or the south?"

"A truly momentous question for each," observed Mark Rookson, as if addressed to himself.

"And it's one, sir," returned William Bottles, gaining confidence as he proceeded, "that we ought to know a little more about

than we do at present. We ought *so*."

"How?" curtly asked the trainer.

William Bottles was again subjected to a feeling of obstruction in the throat, but with a convulsive effort seemed to get rid of the impediment.

"A trial would settle it," replied William Bottles, "bar accident. It would *so*."

"With what?" inquired Mark Rookson.

William Bottles gave a suspicious glance over each shoulder, and then, stooping forwards, whispered hoarsely,

"With the north-country 'oss himself, sir, Belted Will."

"Are you authorised to make this proposal to me?" inquired the trainer, fixing a steady look upon the speaker, which gave a slight shock to his nervous system.

"There's nothing of a cross about it," returned William Bottles, in the belief that the moment had come for justifying himself. "All is to be on the square—a fair trial

between the two before the race comes off for the private advantage of all in the know."

"In order——"

"That we may not be among the skinned lambs," interrupted William Bottles, having a slight dread that the conclusion of Mark Rookson's sentence might not be so mild in conveying the same meaning.

"The game is certainly a winning one," observed Mark Rookson, "and almost as good as the three card trick."

William Bottles felt that the latter part of this remark, whether intentional or otherwise, was rather of a personal kind, and suspected that some of his antecedents were not altogether hidden from Mark Rookson.

"As a safe bit of business," observed William Bottles, after a pause of irksome duration, "I don't think it could be much improved upon."

"And to whom are we eternally indebted

for scheming this safe bit of business?" asked Mark Rookson, with an expression upon his features which no one skilled in physiognomy would have felt the shadow of a doubt about the impression.

William Bottles, however, felt flattered at the question, and admitted, without reservation, that it originated with him. It did *so*.

"Belted Will's trainer and I," continued he, "are old pals who have seen the ups and downs of a racing career, and we all know, sir," said he, with a nod of the head which signified emphasis, "that it's not all beer and skittles."

Mark Rookson, with a long-drawn breath, appeared to tacitly agree in every minute particular to this sage aphorism.

"Now, said I to myself," resumed William Bottles, "and then to my old pal, 'What a chance there is to land a gold mine, with about the risk of a glass of gin,

by having a trial between these osses over the Beacon Course itself, and then being guided by the result as to what our next move should be!"

"Are both owners to be in the secret?" inquired Mark Rookson.

"Both," replied William Bottles, complacently, "so neither is to be robbed."

"I never heard of a more honest piece of rascality," rejoined Mark Rookson, laughing. "It begins to look like thieving no robbery."

"No one is to be dropped in the hole, sir," rejoined William Bottles, beginning to feel sanguine of the success of his proposition, "with the exception of those innocent lambs, the outsiders, who won't be in the know."

"The racing weights to be up?" said Mark Rookson, interrogatively.

"And the racing weights to be up," repeated William Bottles, by way of reply. "They are *so*."

“We will speak of this again at no distant date,” returned Mark Rookson. “In the meantime, not only be silent upon the subject, but endeavour to forget that it has either occupied your thoughts or mine for a single moment.”

William Bottles thought instinctively what was meant, and, without further observation, took a respectful departure.

CHAPTER XI.

WITHIN the almost sacred walls of the Unknown's box, so jealous was the watch and ward kept that no objectionable approach should be made within a safe circle of its whereabouts, Johnny Tadpole and little Mite—the recognized “good boys” of the Heather House stable—were occupied one morning in dressing Queen Mary's son, and completing his toilet in a manner which could scarcely have failed to have proved a most valuable lesson to a lady's maid of high rank. Energetic, skilful, and delicate were the palpable proprieties which belonged to the artistic labour now being bestowed in putting a polish

upon the already polished coat of the Unknown. No half-and-half measures for Messrs. Tadpole and Mite! Their hearts were in their work, and, therefore, it seems superfluous to add that it was well done, or done well, which, perhaps, is the same thing.

Upon his knees, and in a posture which approximated the devotional, Johnny Tadpole was assiduously engaged in rubbing down the satin-like fore legs of Queen Mary's son, and enlivening the minutes as they flew with the normal "p-s-h, w-s-h" of the stable.

In juxtaposition to his friend, companion, and sharer of his small earthly possessions, little Mite had elevated himself upon the bottom of an inverted pail, and was doing all he knew to make the withers, neck, and back of the Unknown glisten through a full allowance of elbow grease, which he was administering with a vigour which could only belong to a "good boy."

Being properly and, therefore, securely “racked up,” Queen Mary’s son could take no undue liberties with his attendants ; but every now and then his incisors came together with a loud snap which, as he turned his head in the direction of little Mite, seemed to signify a strong desire of making a harsh acknowledgment for the tickling he was receiving at his hands, the sequel being a mouthful.

The discipline being decidedly strict in the Heather House stable, all boys, whether avowedly good or otherwise, were required to work in solemn silence, and reserve their powers of conversation for the more fitting opportunities which the hours of play presented. When two, however, happened to be in the same box, and occupied in the same task, the temptation was irresistible to indulge in a mutual exchange of thoughts, and little Mite—at the imminent risk of tarnishing his character—took the objection-

able lead in breaking a first commandment.

"I say, Taddy," began he, in a voice which would not have been heard on the outside of the door of the box, "I feel as if I should like to laugh right out loud."

"Don't do that," replied Johnny, looking up at his friend on the bottom of the inverted stable-pail, in a subdued tone of reproach, "or, perhaps, you'll be heard, and we shall both catch it."

Little Mite compromised his inclination by giving vent to a kind of inward explosion, which, although it temporarily interrupted his labour, was totally devoid of all cachinnatory sound.

"Grin as long as you like, so long as it's not loud," continued Johnny Tadpole, in a voice so gentle that a neighbouring mouse remained undisturbed in his slumber. "But what's it all about?"

"It's all about," replied little Mite, quitting his work, and pressing both hands on

his very small ribs, as if they began to ache from the convulsive action which had been going on within, and standing in a bent attitude on the pail as if for ease. "It's all about," repeated he, "they're trying to nobble the guv'nor."

The announcement of the immediate cause of little Mite's mirth was now almost too much for the serenity of Johnny Tadpole, and, leaving off hand-rubbing the Unknown's legs, he began to roll his head from side to side as if suffering from a similar attack as that of his friend.

"Don't say anything more about it," at length gasped Taddy, "or I shall bust. I shall, indeed!"

"My sides feel ready to crack at the thought of that bit o' business," replied little Mite. "I can't help it," continued he, partly recovering from temporary exhaustion. "They always do, and always will."

"The party must have been pleased with

themselves to think they could get the better of our guv'nor," observed Johnny Tadpole, still chuckling, as he resumed his work in a devotional posture.

"I think, Taddy," responded little Mite, also giving his hands their former occupation, "that great rogues are greater fools after all. They're cunning and sly enough up to a certain point, and then they seem to forget that other people have eyes and ears."

"That's true enough," rejoined his companion. "Three-stun-five never spoke truer words than them."

"Mind your grammar, Taddy," returned little Mite, reprovingly. "I don't think *them* was quite in tune, and, as Mister William Bottles says, 'when you speak plain English, don't let it be doubtful French.'"

"He put his foot nicely into a trap, though, when they got him to propose that

trial," added Johnny Tadpole, without paying the slightest attention to his alleged grammatical blunder.

"We shall never, perhaps, quite know," replied little Mite, "but I think our guv'nor suspected it was a plant from the beginning, and only waited a bit to find out who was in the swim."

"For once in his life, at any rate," responded Johnny Tadpole, "William Bottles was not sharp enough for the game *he* had to play. He thought, no doubt, the trial was to be on the square, and not on the cross."

"Which speaks so far well for his being a flat on *this* occasion," returned little Mite. "But he ought to have known better," continued he. "He ought, indeed!"

"You wouldn't have been sharp'd in a similar way," remarked Johnny Tadpole, again turning an upward look upon the occupant of the pail. "You wouldn't have

been sharp'd in a similar way?" repeated he.

"I!" exclaimed little Mite, momentarily forgetful of the strict discipline of the Heather House stable.

"Hush!" ejaculated the more discreet partner of his toil. "You'll be heard presently, and we shall both catch it."

The caution acting with electrical effect upon little Mite, he called, in a whisper, his friend's earnest attention to the fact in all its simplicity that, upon being interrogated one day by a designing tout as to his exact weight, his evasive reply was, "With my breeches on or without 'em?"

"That's my answer, Taddy," continued he, "as to whether I was likely to be sharp'd like Mister William Bottles by the Belted Will party."

"I wonder how our guv'nor smelt the rat?" observed Johnny Tadpole. "He must have a wonderful nose."

"Nose?" repeated little Mite, in profound

admiration. "Let me see one like his, and I'll take my hat off!"

"How the Belted Will party must have stared," rejoined Johnny Tadpole, with a "p-s-h, w-s-h" at the Unknown's fore legs, which began to shine now more brilliantly than satin, "to have heard when their hoss was mounted for the trial, 'We had better see that the weights are right first.'"

"That's what our guv'nor said," returned little Mite, "at the partickler moment you speak of, Taddy. Says he in a very solemn sort of way before our hoss was stripped, 'We had better see that the weights are right first.'"

"And then the Belted Will party," added Johnny Tadpole, "seeing their little game——"

"Was up," interrupted little Mite, "and that the guv'nor was not to be nobbled in a trial with false weights, sent their hoss home——"

It was now Johnny Tadpole's turn to take up the thread of the narrative.

"With just as much sorrow as thieves always feel," continued he, "when they're found out."

"Yes," said little Mite, with exultation in his tone, as he rubbed away at the Unknown's withers; "but the gov'nor was not to be nobbled!"

"What a game it would have been," remarked Johnny Tadpole, "if they had got the measure of our hoss at their own weights, and we not knowing what they were. They might have cracked up the Bank of England."

"It was an artful dodge," replied little Mite; "but like a great many dodges of a similar kind, it didn't come off in a way that was meant."

"The trial was never intended by our gov'nor," rejoined Johnny Tadpole.

"Not it," returned little Mite, "as he

told the Belted Will party in a way they were not likely to forget. Says he, 'We shall meet but once at even weights over the Beacon Course in a fair public trial. I only wanted to learn whether I was right or wrong about this private one being as honest as it pretended to be, and I now know that my suspicions were well founded ; but under no circumstances whatever would my horse have been started. I merely brought him here this morning for the purpose which has been served.' After this, Taddy, you should have seen the Belted Will party slink away. They looked," continued he, "as they felt, licked to a standstill. They did, indeed !"

"I wish that it had been my luck to see them," added Johnny Tadpole, discontentedly ; "but I'm always out of the good things of this life."

"Never mind, Taddy," responded little Mite, wishing to impart a timely measure of

consolation to his friend and sharer of his small earthly possessions. "It may be your turn by-an'-by."

The head lad—a concentration of dictatorial power in all great stables—now made his appearance within the precincts of the Unknown's box, and Messrs. Tadpole and Mite appeared quite sensible of his presence without bestowing a single look upon him from even the extreme corners of their eyes. The head lad—all head he was faithfully believed to be in the Heather House stable—minutely scrutinised the work done by Messrs. Tadpole and Mite, and, being satisfied with the general effect, it may reasonably be supposed, from the absence of any fault being proclaimed, they received an order to "look sharp," which appeared to be understood in a figurative sense, for the two "good boys," without further invitation, went willingly to breakfast.

CHAPTER XII.

ALONE in the old gloomy room in which his dark-visaged ancestor, in complete harness, scowled frowningly from the wall, Colonel Leferne sat in the easy-chair which, in a legal point of view, was not his own, looking like one, as he glanced impatiently at the door, and strained a watchful ear for a hoped-for footfall, who, tired with waiting, was still waiting for an expected arrival too long delayed.

“Where can Aubrey be?” at length said he aloud, as if to give vent to a train of long silent thoughts. “Where can Aubrey be?” he repeated, thrumming his fingers irritably on the elbow of the chair. “He

must be wearied with his doll by this time, or he is no son of mine. A Leferne was never known to play so long with the same toy."

An approaching footstep, light as it was in the passage without, now attracted the colonel's acute sense of hearing, and his fingers became motionless as, with a fixed and rigid look, he gazed intently at the door as it swung gently back, and his sister, Margaret Leferne, became indistinctly visible in the thickening shades of departing day.

A cloud of disappointment passed over the colonel's features, but there was none either in his voice or manner as he expressed a few common-place words of welcome and the pleasure he felt at her coming to relieve his loneliness. As he spoke in gentle terms, Aunt Margaret placed a hand silently in one of his, which made him give an involuntary shudder, so cold and thin did it feel within his clasp. Seating herself close by his side,

with the corpse-like hand still resting in his, she seemed to breathe with difficulty, and for a few seconds made no reply.

“Recover yourself before speaking,” said he, considerately. “The exertion of coming here has quite exhausted you.”

“I can speak now,” responded Aunt Margaret, in a feeble voice scarcely articulate as she looked with a close, strange, penetrating gaze into her brother’s eyes. “Will you listen to me?”

Nothing would afford him greater pleasure than to give his undivided attention to whatever she had to relate. So he said, at least, whatever doubt might exist as to his meaning.

“’Tis hard to part from those we love, Edward,” she began, in trembling accents, “but harder still, perhaps, to live and be the helpless witness of their sorrow. What would I not do,” continued she, with an earnest gesture, “short of committing sin,

to see you once again happy before I die?"

"There is yet full time for that, let us hope," replied the colonel, vainly attempting to assume a cheerfulness he did not feel.

"Would that I could think so!" rejoined his sister, sorrowfully.

"When the prodigal returns," observed the colonel—"and we must remember," continued he, with a slight hollow laugh, "that we have been a family of prodigals—much of my anxiety will be relieved, if not removed. So I am told, at least, by that ogre, Jeremiah Early, if my son proves obedient."

A deeply-drawn sigh arose from Aunt Margaret's heart, and, slowly withdrawing a hand from that of her brother, she stanchd some hot tears which began to flow, not the less bitter because shed in silence.

"When will the cloud which has lowered so long," murmured she, "have one ray of light?"

"Sooner, perhaps, than we dream of," responded the colonel, with a sudden energy of manner. "I have known," continued he, "fortune to be most kind when she appeared most hard and cruel."

"All has been so long dark to me," rejoined his sister, "that the hope deferred for one gleam of sunshine has not only made my heart sick, Edward, but has broken it with despair."

So sad and low was the tone in which she spoke that he involuntarily drew her towards him, and pressed a kiss upon the nearest cheek.

"I have been," said he, "a hare-brained incorrigible, I fear; but you may as well forgive me, Margaret, and ascribe my normal transgressions to the force of inherited example. As a family of social freebooters and anti-moralists I begin to think that society would be greatly benefited by our total extinction. I have had personally,"

continued the colonel, "as most men have in their alternate excited and depressed conditions of the nervous system, many serious thoughts as to the least objectionable mode of ridding society, at once and for ever, of my objectionable presence; but there are really so many ways for quitting the world that I never could make up my mind which was the readiest, and here I remain because of the doubt and a disapproval of each that presented itself."

"Oh! speak not so lightly as this, Edward," exclaimed Aunt Margaret, "of life and death!"

"Did my unconsidered words leave that impression?" responded the colonel, commencing to beat a few slowly-measured notes with his fingers. "Then let us turn to a more serious subject. What shall it be?"

"I wish to engage your attention for a few minutes," replied his sister, "concerning your——"

The sentence was left unfinished ; but Colonel Leferne felt what the conclusion was without its being added.

“That, indeed,” ejaculated he, “is a weighty one. What have you to say now about the effects of the first and last quarrel with my wife ? Is she dead ?”

“No,” was the quiet answer, “not dead.”

“Then it could not have been a shade of the departed Julia Leferne that I saw in the moonlight,” rejoined the colonel.

“It was Julia Leferne herself,” calmly returned his sister, and in a voice and manner which disclosed that it was no sudden impulse which dictated the revelation.

It might have taken him by surprise, and perhaps did so ; for the colonel’s lips became convulsively pressed together, as if to prevent the escape of some sudden exclamation, and a deadly pallor spread itself over his features as he sat gazing with a steadfast look at his sister in silence which he resolved

at the instant not to break by the utterance of a single word. He might have been changed into stone for any evidence of life which remained ; for Colonel Leferne was waiting—and he would have waited till doomsday had he the power—for what was to follow.

“Your wife,” resumed Aunt Margaret, after a lengthened pause, and in the same collected voice, as if her lesson had been well studied, “is now under this roof, as she has been for a long time past, and, but for the fear that she might have been compelled to return to the place of her confinement from which she escaped, the secret of her being here would not have been so long and rigidly maintained. Do you listen, Edward?”

Yes, to every syllable. That she saw, but neither muscle nor nerve moved as he remained like the petrified form of Colonel Leferne.

“Dull as was her poor distracted brain,” continued his sister, “upon her return to her home, which she had left so long, an improvement soon became apparent when assured that the kindness she received at the hands of her first confidant, Dame Sippy, might be depended upon, and that the secret of her being here was kept inviolable, although the too frequent cause of anxious embarrassment.”

Attentive the colonel sat listening to every word which fell from Aunt Margaret's lips, but said nothing in reply.

“Upon learning all that she had suffered when away from us,” resumed his sister, “and knowing that the torture of mind and body would be repeated if again torn away from our care, I took the most secure means at my disposal to keep her here without being discovered by anyone, and watched with hourly solicitude the gradually returning powers of reason.”

Colonel Leferne still listened, and offered no interruption to the narrative.

“With an instinctive feeling which guided her footsteps in the direction of home,” continued his sister, “poor Julia wandered to the sea-shore upon her escape from her prison-house. Enlisting the sympathy of some French fishermen, they felt compassion for the friendless wanderer, and, taking her willingly on board their vessel, landed her in safety on English ground, forcing their generous assistance upon her to complete her journey. Upon her arrival here——”

“Your voice grows weaker,” at length interrupted the colonel, “and, therefore, I will not impose upon you the exertion of describing the conclusion of this story, which I believe may now be accepted as sufficiently known to me without adding, perhaps, more painful particulars. If, however, I hear aright and understand what is said,” continued he, drawing a hand slowly across his

forehead, "my wife is at the present moment under this roof, and restored to reason. Is that so?"

"Yes," replied Aunt Margaret, "such is the happy intelligence I have to impart."

"She is much changed, of course, by time and disease," remarked the colonel.

"Much, very much," sorrowfully rejoined his sister, "but there are still the remains of what was beautiful."

"That plainly signifies that she is now the ruin of beauty," returned the colonel, "and I am not an enthusiastic admirer of ruins of any kind. But say," continued he, and as he spoke Aunt Margaret's bosom heaved as if with dread, "has she expressed a strong desire for being reconciled to me?"

"Beyond that which language can describe," responded his sister, "praying night and day for the moment to arrive when she might be told that you were ready once more to clasp her to your heart."

The colonel's fingers began to move noiselessly on the elbow of his chair.

"I am glad to learn," said he—but there was something in the methodical tone which jarred harshly on Aunt Margaret's ear—"that she looks forward to that minute particle of time with so much unalloyed pleasure. It's absolute arrival, however," continued he, slowly dropping word by word, "must depend entirely upon herself."

His sister's fixed look met his, but neither spoke for a few seconds.

"I may infer," at length resumed he, "that my wife—the title is not familiar to my lips—knows the present unfavourable state of my pecuniary affairs, which means—ruined!"

"I have told her all," mournfully replied Aunt Margaret, drooping her eyelids as they fell at the thought.

"In that case," continued the colonel, "nothing remains to be added, which will

save much unnecessary trouble. May I accept as the pleasant sequel to the somewhat romantic tale of our first and last quarrel that, being restored to her senses, she is prepared to be dutiful?"

"Am I to understand, Edward," whispered his sister, "that there is a condition to the meeting between yourself and wife?"

"The cause of our separation will be the cause of its continuance," returned the colonel, in a tone that admitted of no doubt as to its being cool and collected, "unless I have her signature to that deed which, years ago, she refused to sign. Jeremiah Early has it in his possession, and, if the parchment is yellow by time, its true intent and meaning, he will tell us, remain in all their pristine freshness."

"Do not mock me, brother!" exclaimed Aunt Margaret, burying her face between her hands as if the anguish she then felt was more than she could possibly bear.

"You cannot be serious in this resolve?"

"You know me too well to doubt the gravity of my resolutions," responded the colonel, as his fingers began to play the few bars of a tune which might now be heard. "I fear that even the characteristic of obstinacy might be applied to them."

"But it seems so harsh——"

"To require a wife to be dutiful?" interrupted the colonel, feigning, perhaps, surprise that he scarcely felt. "If my memory is not unusually treacherous," continued he, "she made a religious promise to obey in the very act of becoming one."

"But not against her conviction of doing wrong," softly argued his sister.

"Between right and wrong," returned the colonel, "there is often but a narrow margin, and, not being governed by any written or fixed code, the difference may be regarded as quite a matter of opinion. The case before us, however, offers no ground

for controversy. My exigencies of to-day are more pressing than those approximating to a quarter of a century since, and the assistance, therefore, which I required then in the shape of substantial relief, I must necessarily want now. Nothing, possibly, can be more easy of comprehension," concluded the colonel, now drumming aloud the finishing notes of a martial strain.

"Nothing," repeated Aunt Margaret, "and yet would that I had died before hearing such words as these from you, Edward!"

"I really fail to see any decided objection to them," added the colonel. My—" he paused—"wife has an advantageous opportunity of rectifying, as far as it may be possible, the very greatest mistake of her life which led to such lamentable consequences both to herself and me. Now, any positive objection being raised to correct this error would present itself to my

mind as something too conspicuously wicked to merit forgiveness in the mildest form that can be conceived. *I* at least must not be supposed capable of possessing the sentiment."

"You will not, then, Edward," said his sister, reproachfully, "even go with me to see her who now awaits your coming with a loving, throbbing heart?"

"I am not in the health or humour for the exciting effects of a dramatic scene in real life," responded the colonel. "Foiled of late at every step," continued he, "disappointment has left me what I am, a debtor to all that's good, I suppose the good will say."

Aunt Margaret, slowly rising from her chair, once more placed her hand silently in one of her brother's.

"You will think better of this, Edward," at length she said, in a gentle voice. "Kinder feelings will prevail at happier moments. Good night."

“Upon the fulfilment of my condition,” rejoined the colonel, as Aunt Margaret left the room, “I shall be ready to greet the return of my”—he again paused—“wife most affectionately. Tell her so, with the best love I possess,” and thus speaking he waved a hand in the direction of his sister’s retreating form in the darkness, and was left alone.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE day for the decision of the Great Match had arrived. Newmarket was astir betimes. Up in the morning early all the good boys had left their beds, not for play, but healthful work, and among the foremost in setting this praiseworthy example might have been seen Messrs. Mite and Tadpole, still of the respective weights of "three-stun-five" and "five-stun-three," having, by practising strict self-denial, managed to keep themselves down to these exact quantities, ascertained by repeated visits to the scale.

"I wish," remarked Johnny Tadpole to the companion and partner of his toil in the

Unknown's box, "that either you, Mite, or I had the mount on our grand horse in this great match to-day. I know he'd try his best if one of us was up."

"That he would," replied little Mite, bending a look of affection upon Queen Mary's son, as, with his nose buried in his crib, he was eating the last allowance of corn previous to being stripped for the race with Belted Will. "That he would," repeated he, giving the Unknown a playful slap on the shoulder, for which liberty a pretence was made of snapping off his head then and there.

"If he meant business," rejoined Johnny, folding his arms methodically across a chest which remained one of the narrowest of dimensions, and without the quality of expansion, "that crack of his teeth would have sent you"—the speaker raised a forefinger, and pointed, with a solemn gesture, above his head—"up'ards."

“One mouthful, and it would, no doubt, be all over with me,” returned little Mite. “That is to say,” continued he, “if he meant business.”

“But there’s no knowing,” resumed Johnny Tadpole, “when a race-oss, like some men and women, is in the humour to swallow a dose of fun, and, if it shouldn’t be the proper moment, it may turn out anything but pleasant to all parties concerned—givers and takers. Never take liberties, *I* say.”

“And good advice, too, in a general way,” responded little Mite. “But I know him well enough. He wouldn’t hurt a hair of my whiskers, if I grew such ornaments—which I don’t. Would you, my flying rocket,” continued he, addressing the Unknown, “all stars, and no stick?”

The Flying Rocket threw back his ears, and lifted a near heel threateningly, but, gently dropping it on the straw below, the inferential conclusion drawn by little Mite was a favourable one.

“Not a hair of my whiskers,” repeated he, “if I grew such ornaments—which I don’t.”

“If either of us was in the pigskin,” said Johnny Tadpole, “he must carry, of course, a lot of dead weight; but every ounce of lead would be life to him. He’d fly under it!”

“To be sure he would,” coincided little Mite. “We should only have to call upon him when to do his best, for the best to be done, and, if necessary, as far as he could struggle on one leg.”

“We have had many an exercise gallop on him,” continued Johnny, in a whimpering voice which savoured of grief; “but there seems no hope now, Mite, of our sporting the purple jacket and orange cap in public. It’s to be the colonel’s last race with his last oss.”

“By all accounts he’s been a wonder,” rejoined little Mite, “and if neither of us

have worn his colours we've looked after the best oss he ever had, and that's something for us, and our grandchildren, perhaps, to say and think of."

"As a little gambolsome foal, Mite," returned Johnny Tadpole, with a strong inclination to screw the acute angles of his knuckles into the extreme corners of his eyes, "I recollect him well as I took him in a line with the setting sun to Greatwood Park. I little thought, as a lad, that I had then the charge of a winner of the Derby; but"—and here his unshed tears were checked from the pride which glowed within—"if we could only see what we may become, and others could see it too, what a difference we should feel when eating humble pie and our neighbours watching us?"

"We shouldn't be choked by it," emphatically added little Mite, "as some folks are."

"Not a bit would stick by the way,"

resumed Johnny Tadpole, smiling at the mental picture he was drawing, "and all would slip down as smooth as oysters."

"But that only belongs to a lift up," observed little Mite. "It's a different thing, you know, when we're grassed head foremost with our heels in the air."

"We are creatures of circumstances, no doubt, Mite," philosophically responded Johnny Tadpole, "and much depends upon which end a man stands—his heels or his head. I don't deny that, and it often happens that, when a chap thinks himself strong and upright as the old red betting-post on the Heath, he's just about to be flung clean out of the pigskin in a way which he feels if he can't describe. The Colonel," continued he, "from what I have heard, has known what it is to be the creature of circumstances."

"But always a gentleman," rejoined little Mite.

“But always a gentleman,” echoed Johnny, widening his legs as he stood, and folding his arms more closely over his narrow chest. “But always a gentleman!”

“Newmarket has seen the best of blood in osses and men,” added little Mite; “but the Colonel in his best day was never equalled.”

“A great man!” ejaculated Johnny Tadpole. “Like, however,” continued he, “many of the game sort who make too strong running at the beginnning, the finish is not all his best friends could wish.”

“It may be a glorious one still in this match,” remarked little Mite.

“If all we’ve heard be true,” replied Johnny, dropping his voice to a confidential whisper, “the Colonel has not been particularly lucky in every match he’s made.”

Feeling that the ground was somewhat delicate on which they were now treading, Mite determined to check the advance of a single inch.

“Let’s mind our own business, Taddy,” observed he, in a manner which could not be mistaken for the object in view. “I was thinking and speaking of the match with our oss and Belted Will. It’s no secret that the old Leferne colours will be seen for the last time to-day.”

“But they’ll be carried in front!” exclaimed Johnny Tadpole, with a glow of enthusiasm spreading over his features, and which mounted from chin to brow as he spoke. “If never again to be seen at start or finish, they’ll be carried in front from end to end.”

“That depends upon the orders how the race is to be ridden,” responded little Mite, “and, as our ’oss has to give a year to Belted Will, I should say,” continued he, speaking like an authority of no questionable nature, “that he won’t make the running.”

“You think, then——”

“That Belted Will, having a great pull in the weights,” interrupted little Mite, continuing the thread of his argument, “will make the pace and go a cracker, and our ’oss, waiting on him stride by stride, will come only at the finish, and then the old colours, Taddy, will flash in front, where they have often been before, but will never be again.”

Johnny Tadpole could not restrain his emotion at these words, and, feeling that silent tears were not the kind of vent to give immediate relief, he momentarily forgot the discipline of the Heather House stable, and began to bellow.

“Hush!” ejaculated little Mite, making a rush at the companion and partner of his toil, and judiciously thrusting a rubber over his mouth in a way which at once muffled the unmelodious sounds; they were rendered little more than audible just without the walls of the Unknown’s box.

"Hush!" repeated he, "or you'll be heard."

"I quite forgot myself," was Johnny Tadpole's excuse for his indiscretion, the parts of speech sounding thick and unnatural from the rubber still being held over his mouth. "But take it away, Mite," continued he, "as I'm better now, and it tastes dusty."

"You deserve to be smothered for making such a howl," rejoined little Mite. "Never make a row, I say, either in joy or misery. Do the quiet."

"We're not always masters of our own feelin's," returned Johnny Tadpole, evidently subdued at the peremptory tone of the companion and partner of his toil. "They sometimes," continued he, "get to be the masters of us."

"Masters or servants," added little Mite, still in the dictatorial vein, "do the quiet."

Taken, as it seemed to him, at a great disadvantage, Johnny Tadpole came to the

conclusion that he could not adopt a wiser course, and, removing the liquid effects of his impulsive grief through the agency of the back of a hand, he looked much more composed and, consequently, better.

“I’m all right now,” said he, with a sound through the nose vulgarly called a snuffle.

“If so, remain so,” replied little Mite; “amen, and so be it. Don’t try to make any improvement upon all right.”

At this precise moment of the earth’s history of sighs and sorrows, comings and goings, meetings and separations, the well-known footfall of the head lad was heard approaching the Unknown’s box, and, upon lifting the latch of the door, he found the two good boys assiduously at work.

CHAPTER XIV.

TAKING the seasons through Newmarket may be said to be rather in a lethargic state than otherwise. Irrespective of certain fixed dates for the disposal of certain events, fraught with the deepest interest to its inhabitants, Newmarket, like the parrot at "The Greyhound," looks to maintain but one eye open, and appears, in a general way, inactive, dull, and drowsy. It might, however, prove unreliable security for a stranger to depend upon this apparent state of coma, and hope to catch any one of the inhabitants asleep with a view of taking undue advantage of their helpless condition. More wide awake than she appears, New-

market knows full well the value of taking care of herself, and, dead or ghostly as she may often seem, there is no denying the simple fact that her thoughts are more inclined to things of the earth than those of an ethereal nature. "Of the earth, earthy." Such is the mundane sentiment of Newmarket.

The day to which precise reference is being made concerning time, place, and circumstance was anything but a dull or dreary one. Astir betimes, the very cocks were heard to crow long before the first streak of silver light tinged the east, and, much earlier than her wont, Newmarket proclaimed herself to be wide awake. It was remarked, however, by a frequenter of the "Greyhound," who might have been seen at daybreak, with great punctuality, before the bar, as a recipient of refreshing attentions from the gentleman behind the bar, that the prophetic parrot was anything

but lively. With a ruffled shake of her plumage, she now and then lifted a foot and scratched the back part of her head, and then, settling down on her perch, peered in silence, with one eye closed, from between the bars of her prison, like a sagacious bird as she was, a-thinking. Nothing, however, could either provoke or persuade her to speak, and there she sat, as she had done since the public announcement of the conditions of the Great Match, as mute as a mummy.

“She’s not given ye the straight tip, I s’pose?” remarked the gentleman before the bar, sipping a mixture of something hot redolent of the fragrance of rum.

“Tip be blowed !” ejaculated the gentleman behind the bar, in a tone which marked extreme irritability of the nervous system. “To follow her at one time was to put down money only to take it up again ; but now, right or wrong, she won’t speak a word.”

“Doesn’t she swear, then?” inquired the gentleman before the bar, with incredulity in his manner.

“Never gives us a round shot now,” replied the gentleman behind the bar. “There was a time,” continued he, with admiration, “when she could let go a volley to be remembered.”

“I’ve come here often and often to hear her,” rejoined the gentleman before the bar, with a smile which amounted to sweetness of expression, “and I was never more edified in the whole course of my life. A master of the art he must have been who taught her.”

The gentleman behind the bar, being the tutor referred to, felt that praise had been given to his accomplishments, and did not scruple to receive it with becoming modesty.

“I gave her the first lesson she ever had,” said he, “and, when she found out what was really wanted, no bird could have im-

proved more rapidly. She soon became my master.

“And gave you, perhaps, a few novel-ties,” added the gentleman before the bar, with a smile which amounted to additional sweetness of expression.

“Not a few, but many,” returned the gentleman behind the bar, “and of the choicest kind; but she says nothing now, good or bad.”

Just at this moment, however, the parrot announced, in the plainest of Saxon vernacular, that the speaker was a decided perverter of the truth. It was pronounced in a guttural tone, but there was no mistaking the true intent and meaning of what was said.

“You’re a liar,” repeated the parrot. “The colonel ’ll——” but here she stopped short.

The gentlemen occupying the respective positions of both before and behind the bar

seemed greatly excited and interested at the prolonged silence having been so rudely broken, and stood gazing with fixed eyes at the prophetess, eager for the conclusion of the sentence.

“She’ll give us the tip presently,” whispered the gentleman before the bar, with a sage nod.

“You’re a liar,” responded the parrot, turning her head on one side with a closed eye, as she slyly peeped through the bars of her cage with the other, and, in accordance with the fixed rules of arbitrary strictness, there was no gainsaying the fact ; for neither coaxing blandishments nor hostile threats produced the slightest effect, and the oracle, standing in a defiant attitude upon her perch, refused to speak another syllable.

“We must give it up,” groaned the gentleman before the bar, draining his glass to the last available drop, and give it up they did.

The day wore on, as all days do, measured by infinite precision of time, and the hour fixed for the decision of the Great Match approached. North was pitted against South, and the partizans of the opposite poles were fierce in their antagonism. It was no secret that Yorkshire would change hands if Belted Will was beaten, and those immediately interested in the transfer of the county were rubbing the ends of their fingers with a cat-like motion, in anticipation of the deeds being duly signed, sealed, and delivered. North and South were alike confident. Commissions to the amount of thousands had been thrown into the market—as the chronicles of the Turf averred—to first back one horse and then the other, and no sooner were they executed than more followed, as if the sum to be staked in this one venture was inexhaustible. Rash concerning the means, and reckless as to consequences, North was bent upon the ruin of

South, and South sily laughed in her sleeve at the attempt.

“ Our champion has the best of the weights !” cried the North, exultingly.

“ Ours can stay the Beacon Course from end to end,” replied the South in defiance, “ and fly at the finish !”

Rumour had stated that Colonel Leferne would not be present to witness the result of the great match between his horse and Belted Will in consequence of severe indisposition ; but, in this particular instance, rumour was at fault, for the owner of the Unknown might have been seen, unobserved by most observers, standing by himself under the cover of the two old, time-grown, storm-torn bushes on the Heath, with his hands crossed upon the top of his cane for support, as he seemed to lean upon it heavily, and with a cynical smile upon his lips. He heard the roar of the crowd at no great distance off, and only wished that he

could join it with the means that he once possessed, and silence that roar.

“Ha!” exclaimed he, in an undertone, as he turned a listening ear to the cries that arose from the Ring, “if I had but the power, as of old, I would strike ye all dumb. Not an offer to lay against my horse should pass. I would accept them all—ay, as long as a pencil would be moved against him.”

The colonel’s eyes flashed as he spoke.

“I’ll lay against the Unknown,” shouted a shrill voice in the distance.

“To your own loss,” responded the colonel, but the words were addressed to himself, and did not cross his lips. “To your own loss,” repeated he; “for the Unknown will win. Yes,” continued he, muttering as he spoke, “something whispers within that my last stake will be won. Fortune treats those best who trust her most, and she has no cause, hitherto, to find fault

with my want of confidence. The finish shall be, at least, what the commencement was."

As the time approached for the start to take place, the excitement of the assembled crowd became intensified. Horsemen galloped to and fro, and the din of voices rose higher and higher; but one thought ruled in the minds of each and all, and that might be read in the anxious faces that flitted past.

"They're off!" was the cry, and soon, as if by universal consent, a dead silence reigned. Men stared in the distance with bated breath, and with pulses that beat feverishly fast or sometimes stopped. One, however, stood alone unmoved, and without the perceptible quiver of a nerve, under the shade of the two old time-grown, storm-torn bushes on the Heath, but gazing like the rest with a fixed look in the distance,

"How do you feel, Taddy?" inquired little Mite in a whisper, as he stood by the

side of his companion and partner of his toil, and in a direct line with the judge's chair in order, perhaps, that he might supplement the decision of the eminent authority occupying it, in the event of there being a difference of opinion on the part of the British public concerning its justice. "How do you feel, Taddy?" repeated he.

"Don't talk," curtly replied Johnny Tadpole, and in a manner which may be described as approaching the disagreeable rather than the opposite. "I've more than I can do well with my eyes now. Let's keep our tongues still."

The reproach seemed to subdue little Mite, and he forthwith collapsed into unbroken silence.

Like the rest of the spectators, little Mite stared with a fixed look in the distance.

On they came, pigmy of size at first, looming larger, as, apparently, head to head

the colours of the Unknown and Belted Will became more conspicuous as they raced side by side, without the perceptible advantage of an inch between them.

Not a voice was raised. Locked together the horses came running as straight as arrows from a yew bow. Stride by stride they approached the winning post; but they might have been, for aught of any appearance to the contrary, one horse for any difference in the position of being first or second. "The Demon" sat with hands down as motionless as if carved from oak, casting, perhaps, furtive glances at his rival; but these were without a witness, for the Unknown was being watched far more closely than his jockey.

The rider too of Belted Will was an artist of no mean order. Like "The Demon" he never moved in his saddle, but swept along like a shadow from the substance.

Stride by stride. Side by side.

Just before the post was gained a roar burst from the throats of the assembled multitude.

“The Unknown wins.”

“Belted Will for a kingdom.”

Opinions differed with the most unprejudiced as to which had won, before the fiat of the judge himself had been given; but as all eyes were stretched and strained to learn the number announcing the victory two numbers were placed side by side on the board which has made many a brave heart quail to look at.

It was a dead heat.

CHAPTER XV.

COLONEL LEFERNE had "made up his mind," and when this balance had been struck in the debtor and creditor account between himself and nobody else, he was never known to make any additions, subtractions, or modifications.

Colonel Leferne had "made up his mind" on the spot to accept the offer of the deciding heat being off by consent. People clamoured, people argued, people persuaded, but all to no purpose. Colonel Leferne had "made up his mind," and there was an end to the controversy, or, if not an end to it, there might quite as well have been for any change in the ulterior measures connected with it.

"The deciding heat is off by consent," said Colonel Leferne to an importunate questioner, as he strolled with a feeble gait from the heath towards the town, "and the stakes are drawn."

"But what benefit will that be to us?" hissed a well-known voice, albeit sent through his clenched teeth.

"The negative advantage of avoiding a certain loss," replied the colonel, without directing even a single look towards the speaker, "and, therefore, certain ruin."

"But——"

"You would say, Early," interrupted the colonel, "that we have by our commissions and omissions already arrived at that most unpleasant stage in the journey of life. It may be so," continued he, "and yet no one would insure a certainty of such a result while a shadow of a chance remained of escaping it. In the deciding heat my horse would have been beaten."

“How do you know that?” fiercely inquired Jeremiah Early—“how do you know that?”

Colonel Leferne drew back the acute angles of his mouth, and replied, in a tone vexatious from its gentleness, as he stopped and rested with both hands crossed upon the top of his cane.

“Do you doubt my judgment, gained from such long and costly experience?”

Jeremiah Early felt that he was now a partner in the costly experience, and felt that his judgment, at least, was not at a premium from an investment of the capital, but, as it seemed to him, at a considerable discount.

“Now, as formerly,” bitterly rejoined the lawyer, “you, at any rate, are wrong, and I suffer from the error.”

“Compensation for my mistakes,” blandly returned the colonel, “is certainly postponed. I hoped that the event of to-day

would by its result have enabled me to liquidate a considerable portion of my debt due to you. As it is," continued he, "I fear that the sum must remain in its entirety."

"Not for another day," added Jeremiah Early. "Not for another day," repeated he, and there was determination both in his tone and manner.

"Indeed!" languidly exclaimed the colonel; "you surprise me."

"I'll realise my securities, even——"

"To the sale of my easy-chair," interrupted his client. "Nothing could possibly be more inconsiderate, Early. But still don't reserve it on my account. Let it go with the pots and the pans."

"All shall go," said the lawyer, bitterly. "I'll wait no longer for anything or anyone."

"There must, of course, be limits even to patience," rejoined the colonel, "and, as a

matter of opinion, I think that yours, Early, must necessarily be exhausted. Let me suggest that you forthwith carry out your determination of not waiting longer for anything or anyone."

"The steps that I shall take will be your ruin," responded Jeremiah Early, with the venom of a man wishing to sting deeply, but scarcely knowing how to sharpen his speech to the keenest edge.

"Rather say," added the colonel, with a cynical smile, "that the steps *I* have taken have been my ruin. Don't reproach yourself, Early, on my account. It is quite unmerited."

"And with the opportunities you have had of paying all that you owe me, principal and interest!" ejaculated the lawyer.

"Lost opportunities are the bitters, Early, which most of us have to swallow in our moments of reflection," replied the colonel. "But to what do you now particularly refer?"

“To this blunder of yours,” rejoined his companion. “It was in your power to turn this last race to your own certain advantage.”

“You have, perhaps unwittingly, applied a truly proper description to the event so recently numbered with the things of the past,” returned the colonel. “It is the last race, Early, in which my colours will have been seen by friend or foe.”

“Why not have had the trial,” said the lawyer, “and so held the trump card in your hand?”

“An arrangement, no doubt, worthy of the abilities of thimble-rig graduates,” replied the colonel; “but scarcely to be thought of twice by a gentleman.”

“Gentleman!” sneered Jeremiah Early. “What is a gentleman without money?”

“A helpless biped it must be confessed,” responded the colonel, “as I can testify from familiar experience. But still he may be a gentleman without a penny.”

"I could see nothing wrong in having a trial," remarked the lawyer, "and then we should have known what to have done."

"By doing the unsuspecting, confiding, and innocent British public," replied the colonel. "That, Early," continued he, "can scarcely be classed among the accomplishments of a gentleman."

"British public!" exclaimed the lawyer, with ill concealed anger. "What is the British public to me more than I am to it?"

"There is sound reasoning in that question," said the colonel, "and yet the mutual indifference which may probably be felt on the side of both can scarcely justify systematic robbery by either."

"It's too late, perhaps, to say anything about it," returned Jeremiah Early. "But why was not the trial brought off?"

"With a special interest in your profession, Early," replied Colonel Leferne, with his lips separated, if not with a smile, "you

will persist in referring to the trial. As you seem incapable of forming a conclusion," continued he, "from events within your own knowledge, I will give you a plain and simple answer. The proposition of having a private trial between the Unknown and Belted Will emanated from the professors of rascaldom. The design was to have the game in the hands of the few and to rob the many. Now, Mark Rookson, to whom the scheme was first suggested, entertains a nervous susceptibility about the ways and means of securing certainties, and has the independent habit of calling men and things by their proper names. In speaking of a crowbar he would not describe it as a toothpick."

"But what has this to do with the trial?" irritably inquired the lawyer.

"More, perhaps," coolly replied the colonel, "than at the present moment appears. To be brief, however," continued

he, "Mark Rookson was thrice armed in that honesty which is above suspicion, and I, beggar as I am, resolved that the Great Match should be as good as it has been great."

"And as unprofitable as both," added Jeremiah Early.

Colonel Leferne shrugged his shoulders; but said nothing in reply.

"Do you return home at once?" asked the lawyer, after a short pause.

"Immediately," replied the colonel. "My carriage and post horses will be here with as little delay as possible."

"You travel with four, of course," rejoined the lawyer, with a sneer.

"Always," returned the colonel. "I am too impatient naturally to travel with less. 'Tis the pace, they say, that kills. Now the pace to me, Early, is that by which I have lived, and I may as well be consistent on my last journey."

"Your last journey," repeated the lawyer, as if the words rose involuntarily to his lips.

"Ay," returned the colonel. "Each and all must take their last journey, and by far the greater number without knowing when they take it. My exceptional privilege is the knowledge that the journey I am about taking on my return to Greatwood Park is my last."

"Why?" nervously inquired Jeremiah Early.

"You saw me, perhaps," responded the colonel, "after the decision was announced that the deciding heat was off by consent, put my hands down the arched neck of my horse and caress him. How did I look?"

"I saw nothing particular in your looks," replied the lawyer, with careless indifference.

"And yet, Early," rejoined the colonel, "what was left of a tough heart at that

moment was broken. Hope had fled, and, worst of all, I knew it."

"But you are no worse off than you were," returned Jeremiah Early, beginning to feel that at least he might be from the words of despair just spoken by the colonel. "If a bankrupt before," continued he, "you are not more so now, and your son's return may still put all things straight."

"I have awaited for my son's return so long," said the colonel, "until I believe that when it takes place—as take place it must—it will be too late for any repairs to my dilapidated fortune. I shall probably have taken possession before we meet, Early, of that small freehold that even you would not wish to turn me out."

"Neither think nor speak in this doleful manner," said the lawyer, feeling that his threats of what he either could do or would were almost useless now. "I'll give you time still, and——"

"Not sell my easy-chair," added the colonel, smiling, as he stopped upon the verge of the heath leading into the High Street of Newmarket and announced that he could not walk another step.

"Lean on me," said Jeremiah Early, as he proffered an arm for support.

"That I have done, figuratively speaking," replied the colonel, "for a long page in my life's history. You have been heavily handicapped, Early, and shall no longer bear the *dead* weight."

Jeremiah Early slightly started at these words delivered in a slow, deliberate tone.

"Or being more strictly correct," continued the colonel "let me say dying. But here comes my carriage, and as you anticipated, Early, with four horses."

With the assistance of his cane on which he leant heavily, and a helping hand from Jeremiah Early, Colonel Leferne took his seat, and the post-boys, knowing their

passenger, started, as soon as the carriage door was shut, at a gallop on their first stage to Greatwood Park.

CHAPTER XVI.

UNDER the same roof, but from the remote date of their first and last quarrel, Colonel Leferne and his wife had not met. Strangely disappointed and mortified with her brother's expressed indifference and selfish objects, Aunt Margaret had avoided his presence for some time previous to his departure from home to witness, as he said, the victory of his favourite, and to win that which he never had yet had—enough. Upon his return no welcome, as usual, awaited him, and the lonely, friendless man crossed the threshold of his home with nothing but the echo of his footfall to strike painfully on his ear.

He was alone, and, for the first time in his life, felt that he deserved to be.

As he slowly approached the door of the room in which he generally sat, it was thrown gently and noiselessly back upon its hinges, and Mr. Thomas Sippy, with a bow of the best, bowed him in.

Mr. Sippy, at a single glance out of the corners of his gooseberry eyes at the colonel's lined, pale, and furrowed features, saw that things generally and particularly were not so pleasant as might be desired, and jumped suddenly at the conclusion that it might be expedient to abide the issue of events, and not anticipate them by any motion of his own. Mr. Thomas Sippy felt that to be silent, even to profound dumbness, would exhibit the wisdom of a truly wise head.

Colonel Leferne sank languidly into the seat of an arm-chair, and, clasping his hands upon the elbows, bent a look steadfastly

upon the floor beneath his feet, and appeared totally unconscious of the immediate whereabouts of Mr. Sippy, or, indeed, of anyone or anything beyond the range of the circle of his own concealed thoughts.

Acting with, perhaps, wise discretion, Mr. Sippy continued mute, but felt uncomfortable at the prolonged demand upon his physical and mental powers.

"I wish he would speak," said Mr. Sippy, in confidence to himself, "if it were only to rosin me up a bit."

Mr. Sippy's wish was scarcely entertained before its gratification was complete.

"Who told you to remain here?" thundered the colonel, with a full measure of the old fire of earlier days.

Mr. Sippy—Mr. Thomas Sippy—knew instinctively that he was going to be rosined up a bit. "I thought, Colonel——"

"Who the devil, sir, gave you permission to think?" roared his master.

“If a liberty,” replied Mr. Sippy, blandly, “it shall not be taken twice, Colonel. I’ll never think again.”

“By the saints,” ejaculated the colonel, “things have come to a pretty pass when I am told—deliberately told—that a fellow who has blacked my boots for the best part of half a century has the insolence to think !”

Mr. Sippy’s natural and acquired pride was slightly wounded at the acidity of this remark, and he bit or nibbled the end of a thumb by way of compensation to his feelings.

“To be rosined,” said he, within his inner self, “is one thing, but to have it rubbed in *too* strong is cruelty to hanimals.”

“You know what I expect from those under my command or immediate control,” said the colonel.

“Quite so,” replied Mr. Sippy, slightly relieved from the embarrassment of nibbling

the end of a thumb—"quite so, Colonel."

"I expect them," rejoined the colonel, "to do, think, speak, hear, and touch precisely in accordance with my own present sentiments, and to leave undone, unthought, unspoken, unheard, and untouched everything that fails to accord with my own present sentiments."

"Quite so," responded Mr. Sippy, deferentially—"quite so, Colonel."

"That being indisputable," returned the colonel, hoisting the well-known signal of his two fore-fingers, "by what right had you the audacity to think you had a licence to remain here without knowing my present sentiments upon the subject?"

Mr. Sippy, remembering his unqualified admission, felt that the argument was against him, and resolved so far as he was concerned, to close the subject in discreet silence. A second pause ensued, and was prolonged to so great a length that it became decidedly

awkward, and Mr. Sippy once more had recourse to his thumb.

"Has anything taken place during my absence which ought to occupy my attention, whether it will do so or not?" asked the colonel, as if about to drop into a quiet doze.

"Not so far, Colonel," returned Mr. Sippy, "as I can recollect, worth mentioning."

"My sister?"

"Goes a shade slower, Colonel, day by day; but she does not change much for better or worse," replied Mr. Sippy.

"And her companion?"

Mr. Sippy was suddenly seized with a cough of a most irritating kind, which seemed to threaten instant suffocation.

"And her companion?" repeated the colonel, in the same drowsy tone.

"As she was, Colonel," spluttered Mr. Sippy, making a powerful effort to check the violence of his cough; "or, as we

used to say at Hoxford, as she were."

"No intelligence of my——"

"Not a word, Colonel," interrupted Mr. Soppo, thinking it a master stroke of policy to nip the expression in the bud.

"Is that fellow Girling seen about here?"

"Not often, Colonel," responded Mr. Soppo. "Now and again he comes to make—as it seems to me—a fool of himself in more ways than one; but he doesn't stay long to bray about this part of the country."

"Bray!" repeated the colonel, with a slight smile separating his lips. "I like the term. It sounds so redolent of the jackass."

"Quite so, Colonel," chimed in Mr. Soppo. "Quite so."

The signal which had been lowered was again hoisted.

"You cannot be otherwise than aware that I know you would as readily tell an unqualified, unmitigated lie, Soppo," observed the colonel, letting his fingers fall gently

upon the elbow of the chair, "as the simple, unvarnished, creditable truth."

Mr. Soppys thumb went with a convulsive jerk to his teeth again.

The colonel raised his eyes slowly, and, fixing them upon those of Mr. Soppys, looked as if he expected an answer without much delay, if any.

"Quite so, Colonel," stammered Mr. Soppys. "Quite so."

"You, in fact," continued the colonel, "never seem to have realized the difference between plain, solid history, and the too exalted flight of the imagination."

The alternative of the thumb being nearly exhausted, Mr. Soppys cough opportunely came to the rescue to fill in a small blank.

"I entertain the suspicion," resumed the colonel, in a somewhat less austere tone and manner, which seemed to mollify the nervous disarrangement of Mr. Soppys system, "that you are not so ignorant of my sons

movements and whereabouts as you appear to be."

Mr. Sippy was about to be evidently profane in his emphatic denial of this impeachment, but was checked by the signal, and cut short in the delivery of a strong personal condemnation.

"It is not my devout wish that you should be d——d, Sippy," continued the colonel; "but you can consult the vicar upon this subject at your perfect convenience. What I want to know at the present moment is whether you have had, directly or indirectly, any correspondence or communication with my son during his now long absence?"

Mr. Sippy raised his hands clasped together above his head, and was about to drop upon his knees.

"Don't trouble yourself," said the colonel, "by posing in ridiculous, ungraceful, and unnatural attitudes. You mean, I see, to convey that my suspicion is groundless."

"Quite so, Colonel," responded Mr. Sippy, straightening his knees, and, in a figurative sense, shaking himself into his accustomed form. "Quite so."

"His small resources must long since have been exhausted," observed the colonel, reflectively, "Without the means of living, how can he live? Dolls, we all know, Sippy, are expensive toys, and his, I suppose, would not fail to impress upon his memory that he was a Leferne."

"Quite so," returned Mr. Sippy. "Quite so, Colonel."

"Admitting, then, the circumstances by which he is surrounded," said the colonel, as if nearly asleep, "how can he live, or, indeed, exist?"

"Without ready money," replied Mr. Sippy, "we all know, who know anything, that things work rusty. But the old blood, Colonel, of our family——"

Mr. Sippy felt that he had committed

a mistake, and hastened to correct it."

"Of *the* family, Colonel," continued he, "knows what credit means."

Colonel Leferne smiled almost imperceptibly, and as if in a dream.

"The old blood, Colonel," resumed Mr. Sippy, "is not, was not, and won't be particular when its wants exceed the supply."

"Your conjecture is, then," returned the colonel, "that my son and his doll are living somewhere on the mistaken credulity of some one."

"Quite so, Colonel," added Mr. Sippy, as if he had earned a compliment, and was repaid with compound interest. "Quite so."

"But this cannot last," said the colonel.

"With the old blood of our family"—Mr. Sippy knew that the error of speech had been repeated, and slightly stammered before the sentence was finished—"this sort of business has lasted, Colonel, for a precious long time. It may come to an end, of

course; but not in a promiscuous hurry with my young master. As a thorough gentleman, he knows how to get what he wants without money."

"I wish that *I* did, Sippy," responded the colonel. "At the present moment it would be more than convenient."

"My wish, of course, Colonel," returned Mr. Sippy, "naterally agrees with yours," and, with a bow of the best, he pressed his right hand upon the left of his breast.

"What a humbug and transparent sham you are, Sippy!" added the colonel. "But then you always were so in the past, and, consequently, are consistent in the present."

"Quite so, Colonel," said Mr. Sippy, with great self-complacency. "Quite so."

"I am almost exhausted with my long and last journey," observed the colonel, drawing a hand slowly across his forehead, much too hot for the effect of a brain at an approach to ease. "Get me some refresh-

ment," continued he, "and let me be the companion only of that ancient rascal," and as he spoke he pointed to the blackened portrait of his ancestor in steel harness upon the wall, "who was the author of our family motto to 'live with will unfettered.'"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE night was far advanced, and yet Colonel Leferne remained in his chair as unconscious of the companionship of his steel-clad ancestor in canvas on the wall as the begrimed portrait of his ancestor was of his; for he was asleep, and apparently, from the motionless form and placid, death-like expression of his features, at rest.

Hour succeeded hour, and Colonel Leferne still slept on. It might have been the effect of a dream, but something between waking and sleeping led him to be partly conscious that a hand was pressed closely on the back of one of his, dropped carelessly on the elbow of the chair in which he

sat. Confused with the abrupt disturbance of his long, unbroken slumber, the colonel raised his heavy eyelids and saw, or thought he saw, a thin, white, shadowy hand covering his own. Not a nerve was shaken, not a muscle moved. Colonel Leferne bent a fixed and steadfast look upon the hand, as if to assure himself that it was not an unreal vision, and to leave no doubt concerning its reality.

The colonel knew that he was no longer a wanderer in misty dreamland, and the hand, cold and immovable as if carved in marble, remaining where it was confirmed the knowledge. Raising his eyes, he saw the wan, spectre-like face of a woman in the flickering, uncertain light of the dying embers on the hearth, standing by his side, and it required no second look to know that that woman was his wife. With a gentle movement he withdrew his hand from beneath hers, and then, rising slowly

from his seat, stood in silence gazing at her.

"It is a long time since we met, Julia," at length said he, in a broken voice which sounded like a hoarse whisper.

"Very long," she replied—"or, at least, since we exchanged a single word. Years, Edward, long years, have passed since then, and not one hour of happiness for me."

"Not one hour of happiness," repeated he, in the same hoarse tone, "throughout long years! That is a long time, Julia, for uninterrupted sorrow."

"Very long," she rejoined, mournfully, and with a deep sigh. "The hours themselves were often counted, and I sometimes thought the night would never come or go."

"You were then very unwell," remarked her husband, as if at a loss what to say, and keeping a fixed but almost dazed look upon the white and bloodless features of his wife.

"Very unwell," she returned; "but still, Edward, I was not mad. Indeed I was not.

My brain at times felt scorched," and she drew a hand slowly across her forehead; "but I was not mad, Edward. Indeed I was not."

"Whether so or not," added he, "that subject need not be discussed between us now. It is too late, as most errors are when discovered, either to prevent or correct."

"But not too late, Edward," she ejaculated, "for which to make a few amends! Say but one word of kindness to me, and all the wrongs that I have suffered at your hands shall be forgiven, even if not forgotten."

"I have not the slightest objection in giving utterance to that one word, Julia," said the colonel, recovering some of his self-possession, "if you will prompt me to speak it."

"I hoped, Edward," was the mournful reply, "your heart would have done that."

“In days long ago,” rejoined the colonel, “it might have rendered me eloquent ; but”—and he touched his left side with the ends of the two forefingers of his right hand as he spoke—“without a cause there can be no effect.”

“Am I to understand then,” returned she, clasping her hands together, and advancing closer to him, “that we are never to be friends again ? Is the short future of my life to be like that of the past, hopeless ?”

“If so,” he replied, “it will only correspond with my own, Julia. In being hopeless, I accept the inevitable.”

“Not one living should be that,” added she. “The condemned ought to know only what hopeless means !”

“It may be so,” continued the colonel, “and, if I am to judge from my own feelings, Julia, I must hold a high position in that category.”

“But let me pray——”

“For me, if you think it advisable,” interrupted the colonel; “but not with me. I am not in the humour for either petitions or thanksgivings.”

“But what have you to say to me?” she asked, wringing her hands convulsively, and moving still nearer to where he stood.

Colonel Leferne’s lips were compressed as he stood gazing at his wife with blinkless eyelids, and not a syllable escaped them.

“But what have you to say to me?” she repeated, in a tremulous voice.

“A reply,” he returned, in a voice still hoarser and more broken than before, “that a man may give for acknowledged and committed wrongs.”

With one throw forward she was in his arms, and her head rested upon his breast, for the first time since their last quarrel, and the first in their lives—long, long ago.

And so they remained, while the light thrown from the smouldering embers on

the hearth grew paler and more indistinct.

"I have been," said he, smoothing the chestnut hair separated upon her brow, and now streaked with silver threads, "most cruel to you, Julia, and there is nothing I can either do or say to compensate for what can never be atoned for."

"We will not even speak of atonement," she replied, looking upwards into his face with a loving smile, which brought to memory thoughts of happier hours. "Let us only recollect that we are together here as in the old time when I had but one wish, and that was yours."

Colonel Leferne said nothing, but remained in silence, smoothing the chestnut hair, now streaked with silver threads, and still resting upon his breast.

"It was my fault to refuse you," she murmured, "what you asked, and, for all that followed, perhaps, I am myself to blame."

Her husband now pressed his lips upon

her brow, and kept them there as if sealed, without uttering a word—not a single word.

“You must think, Edward, for my sake,” she continued, with a cheerful smile, and her face still turned upwards towards his, “that I was the wrong-doer. It was I who thoughtlessly refused your urgent request, and that which followed I alone am accountable for to myself, and only to myself who, perhaps, have suffered most.”

The colonel's arms seemed to entwine more closely the form of his wife as he stood mechanically smoothing her bright, chestnut hair, and as if listening in mute expectancy for something more.

“Tell me, Edward,” she said, with an appealing look which seemed to drive the last tinge of colour from his cheek, “what your wishes are, and if I know in this moment of joy that the fulfilment of one only will break my heart—my heart as your loving wife shall be broken.”

Colonel Leferne pressed her more closely to his side ; but gave no utterance to a word.

“I was, and am so proud of you,” she resumed, with her head still resting on his breast. “The well-bred gentleman and brave soldier was the hero of my young and girlish days, and in you, Edward, I met with the romance of my most sanguine hopes, highly raised as indeed they were.”

The colonel smiled, but still said nothing in reply.

“It might be,” she added, now raising her head and fixing her eyes steadfastly upon his as if she would read his inmost soul, “that in my pride and love for you I forgot all else in the worship of my idol.”

Colonel Leferne’s hand no longer smoothed the chestnut hair streaked with silver threads, but remained motionless upon her forehead.

“It was wrong, and perhaps sinful,” she

said, "to forget in my thoughts and prayers all else besides; but you will not blame me. A woman loves but once, Edward, and too often once too well."

"In me, Julia," replied her husband, in the same hoarse whisper, "I fear that you, indeed, committed the error you describe."

"And yet," she rejoined, with a long, loving kiss which stopped further utterance, "I would at this moment freely give to you that love had I not given it long before."

Colonel Leferne could not speak. The hoarse whisper in the attempt died upon his lips.

"We have no control over the past, Edward," she resumed. "That which belongs to days gone by is beyond even immortal power. Let us, therefore, try to make the future joyous and live for the happiness of each other."

"The future," repeated the colonel, in a murmur that was scarcely audible.

"Yes," she rejoined, "the future, whether it be long or short," and she again kissed him with an affectionate, womanly love.

"Do you know that you are speaking, Julia, to a hopeless, ruined bankrupt?"

"I know much, if not all," replied his wife, "but nothing to make you hopeless while I live and possess the free will to help you."

"There must be no sacrifice of your interests, Julia, for me," said the colonel. "The time has gone for that, and doubtless should never have been."

"Forgetful once," she replied, "I remember now that what belongs to me is yours. Take all and more than all if it were mine to give."

"In your enthusiasm to give all to me," rejoined her husband, speaking in a slow, thoughtful voice, with his arms still entwined around her, "you seem to forget, Julia, that we have a son."

She might in those few transient moments have forgotten that she was the mother of a child whom she had never seen ; but reminded of being so the sudden thought appeared to strike the life blood from her heart.

CHAPTER XVIII.

METAPHORICALLY speaking, the shutters were closed at the dairy in Bromley Marsh. Samuel Wideo's establishment was wrapped in darkness and gloom, and the immediate neighbourhood seemed shrouded in a fog of unusual density. There was no joy in the house or out of it, as far as concerned the privileged few forming the small circle beneath its roof. When the duties of the day were done, and the last minute measure of milk had been delivered to the last, perhaps doubtful, customer, Samuel Wideo stood with his reverse to the empty fire-grate, and the tails of his coat divided as if deceiving himself with

imaginary warmth, but the real chill upon and through his system generally came from within and not from without. The pleasure of memory was clearly not his, as he stood one evening staring at the floor as if looking for a pin which happened not to be there, as far as he could see.

"You don't seem very chirpy, Sam," observed William Bottles, balancing himself on the hind legs of a chair, with his head resting against the wall. "You don't seem very chirpy, Sam," repeated he.

"To lose it only by the skin of his teeth," groaned Samuel Wideo. "It's enough to make one——" and to illustrate his natural meaning, he thrust a clenched fist straight from the shoulder into mid-air.

"I shall never get over it," remarked Johnny Tadpole, with a sigh so deep that it sounded as if coming from his toes. "I shall never get over it, Mister Bottles."

"Yes, you will, Taddy," replied Mr.

Bottles, "in the course of time. You are young, recollect, and only a little more than half-fledged as yet. It's wonderful," continued he, addressing his observation particularly to Samuel Wideo, "how thin our skins are when half fledged."

"Time toughens them," was the sage response. "Time toughens them, Billy."

"If I may judge by mine," rejoined William Bottles, "that's the religious truth, Sam. It is *so*."

"To be a mouse instead of a man by the skin of his teeth!" whimpered Taddy. "I wish I'd never been born!"

"Come, come," expostulated the dairyman, "let's have none o' them heathen sentiments. You wish you had never been born? Think what a Christian privilege it is to be born, the earthly comforts you have had, Taddy, and—and——" Samuel Wideo was clearly at fault for an appropriate conclusion.

"The beef and pudden you've digested, washed down by cooper," added William Bottles, coming to the rescue of his friend's more than broken sentence.

"I don't forget my earthly comforts," returned Taddy, sitting on the edge of the table of small dimensions, and dangling his legs to and fro, "and never did when I had the chance; but the scale is often too light with 'em to keep the balance straight."

"Nicely put," added Samuel Wideo, with unquestionable admiration at the remark. "Nicely put for five-stun-three, eh, Billy Bottles?"

"Don't let us go into weights, sir," expostulated Taddy, remembering a former unpleasant discussion upon the personal subject. "We had better bar weights. I do a great deal," continued he, "and leave undone a great deal to keep mine down to the lowest; but somehow or other the fat will lump on in parts and licks me."

"You mustn't let it do that, Taddy," replied Billy Bottles, "if you're to be a fashionable light weight, as I've told you before."

"How am I to stop it lumping on," irritably asked Taddy, "or when or how am I to get rid of it when lumped on?"

"Starve yourself," benignantly responded William Bottles, with a graceful flourish of his broad-palmed dexter hand. "Starve yourself, Taddy."

"I've heard of that before," said Taddy, with a slight increase of ill-temper. "Starve yourself!"

"Physic yourself," blandly returned Mr. William Bottles.

"Physic be blowed!" angrily replied Taddy.

"Sweat yourself," rejoined William Bottles, with a pronounced flourish of his broad-palmed dexter hand, "and heap on

your sweaters, Taddy, if you want to be a fashionable light weight."

"I begin to think, sir," returned Taddy, addressing his patron with a flushed cheek and flashing eyes, "that we shall get into boiling water presently upon this subject. We'd better cut it short, sir, we had indeed."

"By all means," added Samuel Wideo.

"Amen," concluded William Bottles, turning up the whites of his eyes with a pious demonstration if not particularly in season. "Amen."

"The colonel's colours will never be seen in public again, I suppose," observed Samuel Wideo, in a melancholy tone and depressed manner.

"Never will the purple jacket and orange cap be brought to the front again, sir," responded Taddy, with an unchecked tear trickling and tickling down his nose, "or go behind as circumstances will prevail."

"The foremost that were ever carried,"

rejoined Billy Bottles, philosophically, "must sometimes take a back seat. They can't always be in front."

"That's the rule in more occupations than racing," observed Samuel Wideo. "It even holds good in the milk line in a sense," continued he. "We can't always carry our milk pails before everybody."

"But kept in training," said William Bottles, "what a cup-oss he would have been, Sam!"

"He'd have swept the board of all the cups in the United Kingdom," observed Samuel Wideo, with the air and almost swagger of a man who set controversy at defiance. "The Unknown," continued he, in a determined tone and manner, "would have swept the board of all the cups in the United Kingdom."

"And may sweep the board of all the cups in the United Kingdom," was the ventured opinion of Johnny Tadpole.

“Who knows when I’m his attendant——”

“Attendant? Ho, indeed,” interrupted Billy Bottles, “attendant, eh?”

“Well, *boy*, if you like it better,” added Taddy. “I’m not partickler. *Boy*, if you like it better, Mister William Bottles. I’m not partickler, so long as I have a leg up in his best form. We shall win then, and that’s all I care about.”

“Ho, indeed!” ejaculated Billy Bottles, “and that’s all you care about, Taddy, eh?”

“What should I care about else?” inquired Taddy.

“The precious certainty of losing, Taddy,” replied Mr. William Bottles, with a flourish of his dexter hand. “Winning can never be made a certainty, work it as you will, but losing always can if the strings are nicely pulled by those who know the difference between twice one and twice two. Don’t talk to me about the honour of winning,” continued he, with confessed con-

tempt in his tone and gesture, "but let us have a pronounced blessing upon the profits and virtues of losing, Taddy."

"I shall give my pronounced blessing," rejoined Johnny Tadpole, "when it's asked for and not before. As a fashionable light weight I shall win when I can."

"What a little donkey, then, you must be!" exclaimed William Bottles. "Win when you can, and not listen to reason?"

"A man who listens to reason once," and Johnny Tadpole threw out his pigeon breast with a swell of manly pride, "often finds that he has listened to reason once too often."

"Nicely put for five-stun-three,—eh, Billy Bottles?" interrogatively remarked Samuel Wideo.

"I don't say it wornt," responded William Bottles, cynically. "But what's the good of heavenly opportunities, if you don't embrace 'em?"

“Roping isn’t one,” rejoined Johnny Tadpole, with an outward effect almost approaching the majestic. “Foul riding isn’t another,” continued he, in a manner closely connected with the sublime. “And a man——”

William Bottles raised the broad palm of his dexter hand as if commencing a practical obstruction.

“Who sells a race,” said Johnny Tadpole, without seeing or, at any rate, heeding the sinister interruption to, perhaps, his maiden speech, “who sells a race,” repeated he, with now a solemnity of manner treading closely upon the extreme, “ought to be juggled!”

“Juggled?” said William Bottles. “What’s that?”

“It isn’t pleasant whatever it may be,” responded Taddy, “and when a chap’s juggled he begins to sing small, I can tell ye. No more real jam for him!”

William Bottles looked puzzled, but maintained a strict reticence upon the respective subjects of "jugged" and "real jam."

"No more mounts," resumed Johnny Tadpole, "except it's Major Armstrong up. Stand down is the order even from those who have worked a barney with a poor little fellow tempted to work a cross; for even the sharps are afraid to trust him afterwards. From bad to worse down he goes, and there's no more real jam for him."

William Bottles began to suspect that some of the dearth of the confectionery referred to might be traced to his having yielded too impulsively, perhaps, to heavenly opportunities.

"Nicely put," again chimed in Samuel Wideo, "for five-stun-three—eh, Billy Bottles?"

Mr. William Bottles might have entertained an opinion upon the point under dis-

cussion; but if so it was concealed. In silence he rubbed the end of his nose upwards more than once, and said nothing in reply.

"What a cup-oss he would have been, Sam," at length he exclaimed, "if only trained for long distances! He wants a scope o' ground fairly weighted, and then nothing of any age would make him even gallop."

"Can't you see him pulling over the whole lot, Mister Bottles, and making everyone of 'em either lie down or stand still?"

"P'raps I can and p'raps I can't," curtly replied William Bottles, who felt that he had had rather the worst of the late argument with Johnny Tadpole.

"Don't give way to temper, Billy," mildly remarked Samuel Wideo. "It was nicely put for five-stun-three."

"I'm getting a little dusty about the lips,"

observed William Bottles. "Can't we have a drop of cooper?"

His host—generous to a fault—ventured to think that a drop of cooper might be introduced by way of an episode, and Johnny Tadpole hurried off to secure a supply equal to the demand.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE gamekeeper's cottage continued to be tenanted at long, short, and uncertain intervals. Harry Girling was sometimes there, it was said, but no one in the neighbourhood of his home appeared to know when he came or when he left. Keeping completely aloof from all his friends and acquaintances, he seemed to be wandering to and fro, looking helplessly, it was conjectured, for his lost child, not knowing where to seek for her. He had asked for information from everyone he could think of as to where he should go in search of Ivy, no matter how far, so long as he could but find her. He would go on foot, and

beg his way, or starve in the attempt, over distant lands to once more have his daughter in his arms and kiss her before he died. It was his only wish, so he sometimes said ; but there was another quite as strong and absorbing, and never from his memory, except when weeping silently and alone. At such moments as these the fierce wish for the opportunity of clutching Aubrey Leferne by the throat and strangle the life from him in a grasp that should not slacken for an instant so long as his heart beat, might be forgotten, but only at such moments as these. It soon came back with renewed strength. Then there was no scalding trace left of tears, and he looked capable of the deed he so long contemplated—murder.

Either with or without Colonel Leferne's consent, he scarcely knew which, Harry Girling was an inmate, at least, if not a recognised tenant, of the cottage which had been his and Ivy's home so long. The

room in which he now sat had been left precisely as she had quitted it. Nothing had been disturbed. In a small glass on the mantelshelf there were a few dead and withered flowers, the last placed there by her. On a small table, close to the latticed casement where Ivy was often watched by her father deftly plying her knitting-needles, a piece of unfinished work was left, and as it dropped from her hand so it remained. The rickety old clock nailed against the wall had run slowly down, and stopped for the want of the hand that hitherto, with systematic punctuality, had maintained its popular character for keeping a well-balanced check upon the flying hours. The dial revealed the moment of the omission, and the swaying pendulum never moved since.

Dust had accumulated. Spiders had spun long, black, thick meshes here and there, and within easy reach, but without apparent

fear, of the disturbing broom. Proofs were numerous and conclusive that Ivy had been long away from her home, for neglect was too visible in and around it.

Brooding over the one grievance of his life, Harry Girling paced one night about his dwelling with the restless, irritable motion of a wild beast in its cage, and with about the corresponding instinct of one goaded to fury, when he became aware of the near approach of a footfall, and suddenly stopped to listen as it came nearer to the entrance door of his cottage.

Who could that be, and at such an hour?

A click of the latch, and the Rev. Robert Roundhead appeared with the cheery self-announcement, "It's only me, Harry Girling. Don't be afraid of me. I'm the vicar, once called by the Oxford undergraduates Old Nails, or Needle Wire. Don't be afraid of me."

Few indeed were the men that the stal-

wart gamekeeper had ever yet entertained fear of, and he must have been framed in a different mould to that of the vicar to make his heart quail.

“I’m not at all afraid, sir,” quietly replied Harry Girling. “Why should I be?”

The question seemed unanswerable; for the Rev. Robert Roundhead, after a pause, ejaculated, “Humph! and didn’t see why he should be.”

“I’m very glad to see you here, sir,” remarked Ivy’s father—“very glad.”

“So should I to be here,” replied the vicar, “if I could only see you, Harry. Can’t we have a light?”

“I think I can manage that, sir,” rejoined Harry Girling, “although it’s a long time since I have had a light here.”

In a short time a candle was found among some hidden stores, and was soon throwing things within reach of its rays into light and shadow.

"There," exclaimed the vicar, gently dropping himself upon the seat of the nearest chair, "how cheerful that is! I can see you, Harry, and you can see me. How cheerful that is!"

Ivy's father might have felt the influence of the proclaimed cheerfulness thrown around by the solitary candle, but there was no outward effect of his being so.

"Follow my example, Harry," said the vicar, "and occupy a chair. Rest is Nature's compensation for fatigue."

"I wish that I knew what rest was, sir," responded Harry Girling, taking a seat; "but I am a stranger to that, and have been so for many a long day."

"In my opinion," rejoined the vicar, "no time should be lost in the endeavour to make you and rest, Harry, better friends."

"How can that be, sir, situated as I am?" asked Ivy's father, and his eyes almost glared with ferocity as he spoke. "Look around."

The vicar's purpose would not have been served by looking around, and he therefore refrained from doing so.

"You will then see, sir," continued Harry Girling, "what a ruined home means."

"The injury, the grievous wrong, that you have met with, Harry," responded his visitor, "is unquestionable, and admits of no plea that I know of in defence. A specious excuse might be offered, perhaps, by the unscrupulous and careless," continued he—"those who are indifferent to the sufferings of others, and mindful only of their own—about the thoughtlessness and impulses of youth; but I am not here to speak in such language to you."

"I hope not, sir," returned Ivy's father, between his clenched teeth. "I could not listen to it."

"Perhaps not," added the vicar. "At any rate, your patience will be spared the trial."

“It may be as well, sir,” said Harry Girling, “that we should avoid speaking upon the subject altogether. It only makes me feel worse,” and he struck his breast with his broad hand as if he would drive it in.

“The little I have to say about your sad case,” replied the vicar, “and I have come here specially to say it, will, I trust, have a different result.”

“That is impossible, sir,” rejoined Ivy’s father. “Nothing that can be said while I live can make me feel better. There is an act that will do so—a deed to be done—but that must be my own.”

“There is no mistaking your intention, Harry Girling,” returned the vicar. “You mean to add wrong to a greater wrong, and so increase misery to yourself. What shall be said of a man who does this?”

“That his misery drove him to do it,” was the reply. “To which many a black and bloody deed may be traced.”

“I will not gainsay that,” said the vicar ; “but it would be, as it has been, no justification whatever, and a sorry excuse for its commission. If we allow sinful thoughts to possess our hearts, we must be hopeless of our acts being less hostile to ourselves than to others.”

“And yet it should be remembered, sir,” replied Ivy’s father, “by those who sit in judgment upon the wretched without having known what their feelings were, that what they sometimes do cannot be measured by themselves.”

“Be that as it may,” rejoined the vicar, “and I am not disposed to do otherwise than agree with you, Harry, let me implore you to quit this place and neighbourhood for a time, if not for ever, so that your dark thoughts may not be fanned by what you daily see, and others occupy their place, of forgiveness to her you love so well, and, perhaps, mercy to him who wronged both

her and you. The means," continued he, "shall be supplied for all your wants, and without stint."

Ivy's father leant suddenly forward in his chair, and said, in a voice almost inarticulate,

"Are they coming back?"

"Nothing more is known of them at the present moment," quietly responded the vicar, "than for many months past. Since, indeed, they left not a trace of where they are, or where they have been, has ever been discovered, and so the position remains."

"I have been often told so," returned Ivy's father, "and I suppose it's true, because all say that it is. Has anyone but me," he continued, "tried to find them?"

"No," replied the vicar, "none but yourself, and, in the belief—which amounted to almost knowledge—that they straightway left England to avoid the immediate consequences of their rashness, the Colonel

resolved to await the compulsory return of his son, and he awaits it still."

"How long it seems!" groaned the unhappy listener. "How long it seems!"

"Will you be governed by my advice, Harry," asked the vicar, "and leave before——"

"No," interrupted Ivy's father, resolutely, "not to save my soul! I'll meet him, sir, when and where I can, without the loss of a single moment, and we shall meet but once."

"This is mere raving, Harry," returned the vicar, "and I begin to think that your uncontrolled thoughts may lead to uncontrolled deeds. I must think more of this," said he, rising from his seat, "and decide what should be done, if I have not your assurance, coupled with your departure in accordance with the conditions I have expressed, that they are but idle threats. You must not meet."

“I’ll remain here, sir,” was the reply, with a dogged and sullen determination, “and take the consequences of my own acts.”

“That being so,” added the vicar, “I have now nothing more to say. Good night,” and he took his departure from the lonely man’s cottage.

CHAPTER XX.

JEREMIAH EARLY and Colonel Leferne had been closeted together for some hours. They had often been "closeted," but the consultation had never been extended beyond the present limits of confidential communication. Up to the present moment, however, no satisfactory effect was perceptible in the contracted features of either, and each looked at the other as if he knew that he saw his enemy face to face, and that there was not the slightest error in the conclusion.

"You admit, then," said Jeremiah Early, "that your wife is both competent and willing to sign——"

“Quite so,” interrupted the colonel, leaning back in his chair, and beginning to thrum a lively but noiseless air with the ends of his fingers upon the cushioned elbows. “Quite so,” repeated he. “There is no necessity, as far as I can see, Early, for me to repeat her legal and too affectionate powers.”

“But that you will not exercise your influence in obtaining her signature, by which most, if not all, of your debts could be satisfied. Is that so?” asked the lawyer.

“My reply must sound almost wearisome, Early,” responded the colonel; “but I repeat it literally by your request. My wife will not render herself penniless for me by my express wish, or, in an arbitrary sense, by my permission.”

“There was a time that she would have had to have done so,” observed Jeremiah Early, in a cynical tone.

“You are referring, perhaps, to our first

and last quarrel," said the colonel, without the quiver of a nerve. "A long time since, Early. Pardon my calling your attention to the difference between the past and the present."

"In so far as I am concerned," replied the lawyer, "I see but little. You owed me a great deal then, and you owe me a great deal now."

"Your present condition," rejoined the colonel, continuing his soundless tune upon the arms of the chair, "may be attributed to your senseless abuse of a golden opportunity. You should have backed the Unknown for the Derby."

Jeremiah Early gave a stifled groan, as if it came from a latent store of pent-up agony.

"Had you done that," resumed the colonel, "had you backed my horse instead of laying against him, I should not have been in your debt, Early, a single penny,

and a plethora of riches might have been in your possession."

The lawyer gasped as if for want of breath.

"Owing, therefore, to your own miscalculation—I use the mildest of terms, Early," continued the colonel, "you have put yourself in the unpleasant position of which you complain."

"But only through your capricious decision, Colonel Leferne," added the lawyer, in a deprecating tone. "The scheme had but to be carried out," continued he, "for it——"

"To systematically rob me of the great object of my life, and effectually to swindle our friends, acquaintances, and the British public. Is not that so, Early?"

Jeremiah Early had a reply, but it seemed to die upon his lips before it could escape from them.

"In so far as my being your debtor,

Early," resumed the colonel, "I entertain a strong opinion that you are mine. If we balanced the account in its entirety, I think the result would be in my favour."

"A court of law," responded the lawyer, "would give a different decision."

"Which cannot fail to remind you, Early," continued the colonel, "that a court of law is not always a court of justice."

"For large sums borrowed from time to time," added Jeremiah Early, and with the angles of his mouth drawn back he seemed to hiss the words from his lips, "I have neither principal nor interest."

"To be directly traced to the miserable folly," said the colonel, throwing his head further back in his chair and looking at his companion with half-closed sleepy eyes, "of not taking advantage of a golden opportunity. It was placed unconditionally at your feet, Early, and you villainously kicked it from you, insuring an irretrievable loss to both of us."

"It is useless now to speak of that," replied the lawyer, in a subdued tone, which revealed the acquired knowledge that his client was not to be influenced by threats. "The question is, what is the course you mean to adopt to satisfy me?"

"By my honour," rejoined the colonel, "that seems to be the exact question that I should put to you, Early."

The lawyer bit his lips in silence, for he saw that he now possessed an impracticable client, one that had resolved to set him at defiance.

"In what is termed, I believe," continued the colonel, "a strictly legal point of view, I must be considered your debtor; but apart from that red-taped position, which a gentleman cannot be expected to regard otherwise than with contempt, I look upon you, Early, with the doubtful affection of an insatiable creditor. You owe me a debt—let us call it of gratitude—for placing at

your feet a golden opportunity, undeserved you must admit, and few amongst us, whether deserving or not, ever possess. You fail to see, perhaps, the value of a lost golden opportunity, and you are not singular in your impaired mental vision. Men do not as a rule derive much satisfaction in weighing it to a nicety."

"Do you intend, then, to repudiate my debt?" inquired the lawyer, fiercely. "Am I to understand that?"

"Certainly not," replied the colonel, in a bland tone, and strong contrast to that in which he was being addressed. "Certainly not," repeated he. "No gentleman permits such a word or its definition to be in his vocabulary. I merely wish you, Early, to take into consideration whether, from the respective points of view we entertain concerning our indebtedness, a fair balance might not be struck between us."

"I am not disposed to continue this

child's talk any longer," was the angry rejoinder.

"It grieves me to hear you say so," returned the colonel, in a soft voice; "for I am just in the humour to continue our light and gossamer discussion. It really seems, Early, to refresh me."

"Your compact with me," added the lawyer, "was that the estate should be disentailed and sold through the consent of your son, and the proceeds applied to the complete discharge of my claim."

"I am at loss to conjecture," said the colonel, in a quiet and unruffled manner, "which of the two was the greatest rascal—you, Early, in proposing the brigand scheme, or me in acceding to it."

"We must look to ourselves," responded Jeremiah Early, "in matters of business."

"And in so acting," rejoined the colonel, "we too often forget the sublime mandate of doing unto our neighbour that which we

would he should do unto us. In carrying out the instinctive policy of looking to ourselves, Early, we think, primarily, of the benefit that our neighbour should confer upon us, and then, in return, consider the best plan of doing him. Is not this the result of your great and varied experience?"

No answer being given to the question, Colonel Leferne, after a short pause, continued,

"Referring to our devilish compact for dispossessing my son of his inheritance at the very stroke of the clock that he was to become master of it, Early, I have a few words to say which cannot fail to prove interesting to you."

Jeremiah Early became on the instant as attentive a listener as ever strained the sense of hearing so that not a single syllable might escape him.

"Upon my son's abrupt departure with his doll," said the colonel, "I was quite

prepared that it would last in strict accordance with the precedents of his ancestors, particularly of that disreputable old vagabond"—and he pointed to the portrait of the knight in armour upon the wall above him—"who illustrated in his acts the motto of our family to 'live with will unfettered.' I knew that, consistently with the inclination and moral limits of a Leferne, Aubrey would stay with his doll so long as the toy continued new, and, perhaps, while his slender resources lasted so as to prevent great personal inconvenience to himself. I must confess, however, that his prolonged absence, beyond the probable realization of both these events, surprises me in so far, Early, as anything can give rise to that ridiculous and feature-distorting emotion."

Jeremiah Early was about to speak, but, the signal of the two fore-fingers being raised for reticence, he responded to it and said nothing.

“ You would suggest that, with the facilities learned at Eton for borrowing,” resumed the colonel, “ he may have obtained temporary aid. It is neither impossible nor improbable ; but there still remains the inexplicable duration of the charms of the doll. They have continued, I suppose, longer than usual with the Lefernes of old ; but, however delayed, his return home is certain upon the discovery of their departure. With the tradition of his race, Aubrey is sure to separate from her the moment she fails to find favour in his eyes, and I cannot comprehend, Early, how or by what means it has continued so long, entertaining, as I do, implicit faith in the extremely fugitive attractions of dolls for each successive generation of our family.”

“ You now at least have little doubt of his speedy return ?” observed the lawyer, interrogatively.

“ None whatever,” responded the colonel,

“and it is concerning his anticipated re-appearance in the home of his forefathers, of course penitent for his misconduct and outrage against good manners in closely following their footsteps, that I wish to draw your particular attention, Early.”

The lawyer required nothing to stimulate his attentive powers. His ears were more than ready to hear.

“Upon taking a retrospective view of what I have done,” resumed the colonel—
“and there are a great many things both of commission and omission which, as a matter of choice, I should not care to repeat—there is not one less deserving of absolution than the design upon my son when you and I, Early, awaited the minute hand to mark the exact time when he could lawfully, by his own hand, set the seal upon his own ruin.”

“You borrowed my money and agreed—”

“At your instigation,” interrupted the

colonel, "to commit an act little short, if any, of a crime. I have to thank neither you nor myself for the consummation being defeated."

"All I want is to be paid," growled Jeremiah Early.

"Anyhow and by anyone," responded the colonel. "Is that it?"

"I must have my money," rejoined the lawyer. "Upon your son's return get him to sign the deed, and I will release you of every farthing due to me, principal and interest."

"What if I say no to this generous offer?" asked the colonel.

"Then I will realise the securities I hold, and sell——"

"My easy-chair," added the colonel. "Well, be it so! I feel that I shall not want it long, Early, and if taken from me a little too soon I shall be consoled with the thought that I lost it through you."

“Do you accept the terms I offer?” passionately asked Jeremiah Early.

“No,” was the colonel’s firm and collected reply. “Upon Aubrey’s return home,” continued he, “should I be alive at that time of the world’s sad history—a wearisome record of most that is sorrowful and all that is disagreeable—I will place before him a full, true, and particular account of every transaction of the slightest importance that has ever taken place between us, even to the loss of the golden opportunity, and the exceedingly crooked way in which that loss was incurred. He shall be told the whole truth, Early, and then left to do as he pleases, or what he considers right, for the sake of his father’s honour—not for his love.”

“And I have to depend upon this?” said the lawyer, as if he had recently swallowed a chemical combination of acids and bitters.

“Together with the securities you hold,”

coolly added the colonel. "Do not forget, Early, the pots and the pans, and, least of all, the portrait of that famous or infamous old scoundrel who, in a very few words, taught unborn generations of the Lefernes how to live."

Without further remark Jeremiah Early sullenly quitted the room, and as the door closed upon his heels the colonel began to drum an invigorating martial air upon the cushioned elbows of his easy-chair.

CHAPTER XXI.

SINCE the close companionship of Aunt Margaret and Julia Leferne had been restored at Greatwood Park, everything had been told, but with hesitating reluctance, concerning her son's absence and the fore-shadowed pecuniary ruin of her husband.

Happy, at least, in having a few words of kindness spoken to her, the wife—full well remembering earlier and happier days—often entreated that she might give up all she possessed for him, would to heaven that it were more!

A smile lighted up the pale features of the colonel as these words were uttered in the lengthening shadows of a summer sun-

set, and as they sat together with one of her hands clasped in his in the very room in which their first and last quarrel took place years and years ago.

Aunt Margaret was the only witness present of what she had so earnestly and hopefully prayed for, and, gazing upon them with a loving look, whispered a petition in secret that each might be spared to live and render the other happy.

“We are but the creatures of time and circumstances, Julia,” remarked the colonel. “The very cause which made us strangers to each other long since is now urged by you as a medium to unite our friendship.”

“I care nothing, Edward,” she replied, looking at him as no woman can look but at the man she loves, and the only man she ever loved—“I care nothing,” she repeated, “how or by what means we are friends, so long as we are among the dearest that ever lived.”

“You must refrain from becoming enthusiastic,” rejoined her husband, smiling, “or I shall soon be unable to give utterance to my prosaic sentiments. As a lover, you will recollect that I was neither eloquent nor poetical.”

“And yet no words that were ever spoken then, Edward,” she returned, “but are remembered now, so sweet and dear were they to me. I was always thinking of them when away from you, and believed that the day must come when you and I should again be as we are at this happy moment of my life.”

“But have you nothing to say of past wrongs—nothing to reproach me with?” asked her husband.

“Not one word,” she replied, “or of anything that you have ever said or done to me.”

Colonel Leferne fixed a keen, inquiring look upon his wife, but knew in what he

saw that he had heard only the simple words of truth from a heart still young that loved him, perhaps, too well.

After a long, unbroken silence, with her hand remaining clasped in his, the colonel said, in a low tone, scarcely above a whisper,

“To feel that we have done a great injury, and know that it is too late to retrieve it, Julia, is a bitter thought.”

“Let no reflections of sadness be associated with me, Edward,” she returned. “Look in my face, and you will learn that a happier wife could not be.”

“But of recent date, to be measured by hours,” rejoined he, in a voice scarcely audible. “What shall be said of the long interval of years of sorrow caused by me?”

“Not one word,” she replied, earnestly—“not one word. Let all be forgotten as it has been forgiven.”

“If I could but recall the past,” added

her husband, "I would prove to those I have most wronged—and they are present to hear the confession—that my repentance should be practical and sincere to them, at least, if to none besides."

"We will believe," observed Aunt Margaret, in her usual plaintive and quiet voice, "that in those words you have to us, Edward, recalled the past, and made the future bright and full of hope."

"The future," said the colonel, reflectively, "within the limits of our individual actions, is under our own control; but the past is beyond the reach of even immortal power. That which has been *has* been, and the record either for good or evil must remain for eternity."

"How different would be the hourly deeds of men if such a thought as this preceded their commission!" exclaimed Aunt Margaret.

"The imperfection of human nature for-

bids the possibility," responded the colonel. "Men live for self-gratification, and, the present being, as they think, their own, forget the harvest which must follow their scattering of evil broadcast as certain as the night succeeds the day."

"'Tis a forgetfulness which seems to be the very source of human misery," observed Aunt Margaret.

"And when reminded by the stern reality of Time," added the colonel, "it is always too late. The law unchangeable to others," he continued, "must be so to me, and I now feel, towards its closing scene, what a misspent life truly means."

His wife threw her arms around him, and, resting her head upon his breast, large, hot, scalding tears stole down her cheeks which almost scarred them as they fell.

"What stern duty of life," resumed he, "have I performed, or how have I performed it? As a husband, what shall the

wife say," and, as he spoke, he smoothed the chestnut hair streaked with silvery threads beneath the tender, gentle motion of a hand—"what shall the wife say," reiterated he, "unless she flatters him with merits he never possessed?"

"Who shall be the judge of that?" said Aunt Margaret.

"Myself," responded the colonel. "Knowing myself, I think that I may give that reply without reservation. I repeat," he resumed, still smoothing the silky, chestnut hair, "what shall the wife say?"

"That I love you, Edward," was the reply, stifled with rising sobs, "as when you first said that you loved me—a trusting, believing girl."

"And had I been as kind to you, Julia, as you deserved," rejoined her husband, "you would not have loved me more."

"Because it would have been impossible," she returned. "You possessed my

heart when I gave it, and you have it now."

"Despite of all then, Julia," added the colonel, and he pressed his lips upon the marble-like forehead of his wife, "I am in your mental eyesight the model of what a man should be when he plights his troth to her whom he persuades to believe him."

"If by well remembering your acts and words to me in other days," she responded, "I should recollect anything, Edward, that might be the shadow of a reproach to you, let it be deemed a circumstance of the past leaving no trace behind."

"And yet the unsparing forgiveness which is offered for its having taken place," returned her husband, "is red-handed evidence of what I have done, and for which no recompense can be made. Too late, Julia, too late!"

"That can never be," said Aunt Margaret, "while we live. Repentance," she added, solemnly, "cannot be too late even

if it comes with the last fleeting breath of life."

"Such has been the dogma of Mother Church in all ages," responded the colonel. "But what has our sister to say of the sighs and tears breathed and shed for me?"

"Nothing, Edward," rejoined Aunt Margaret, "beyond the fervent hope that they were neither sighs nor tears given in vain."

"And so," continued the colonel, "with the confessed wrongs I have heaped on the heads of both, I am to be released of all consequences to myself, and leave you to bear the burden which I alone should know the weight of. But what will our son say upon his return home to greet his mother for the first time since he left to live with will unfettered? Will he, too, have nothing to accuse his father of?"

Not a word was uttered in reply by either his wife or Aunt Margaret, but each looked at the speaker with tearful eyes and sorrowing hearts.

“Am I to think?” continued the colonel, “that he can forgive me, as you have done, for neglecting or abusing every duty that I ought to have performed, born as he was, Julia?”

“These self-reproaches are torture to me, Edward,” responded his wife. “Let me beg of you that they may cease.”

“If such anguish to you,” added her husband, “they can be no less so to the author of them, and I feel that I much more deserve to bear the pain than you, Julia, who should be a stranger to what self-reproach means. The guilty only should know this sting of conscience—not the innocent.”

There was an interval of silence, which neither seemed disposed to break. At length, however, the colonel resumed.

“In the short-sighted selfishness of my nature,” said he, “I thought only of myself, forgetting even my wife and child, or, if remembering them, simply as the means to

gain at some distant date my own selfish ends. Strange as this voluntary admission must sound—and the struggle that I have had to make it Heaven only knows!—I would not retract a single syllable to add one hour to my life; for I never felt so content to part with it as at this moment of peace, if of humiliation.”

“Oh! Edward,” exclaimed Aunt Margaret, “that I should have lived to hear such words from you!”

“And I to live to speak them,” responded her brother, “must be an unsolved mystery to myself. They are, however, recorded,” continued the colonel, “either for or against me, and I will accept the issue.”

The lengthened shadows grew paler with the sinking sun, and darkness began to fall around when Colonel Leferne suddenly started to his feet and ejaculated—

“Hark! Did you hear that footstep?

It is one that is familiar to me, and I know full well the sound of."

Thus speaking, and with an effort he seemed scarcely master of, Colonel Leferne hurried from the room.

CHAPTER XXII.

MR. SOPPY—Mr. Thomas Soppo—
M since his penitential return to the bosom of his family, which, stripped of all metaphorical verbosity, meant nothing more nor less than that of his wife, was no longer the arbitrary, dominant lord and master of the providitor to his comforts, contributor to his luxuries, and full partner of his daily labours, to say as little as possible concerning the manifold odd jobs which were thrown in to make up the sum total. Mr. Soppo felt that, having been supposed—for he never quite admitted it—to have made a fool of himself, he could not consistently occupy the high pedestal which formerly

seemed to him either his natural or acquired position in the presence of her who now evinced anything but a disposition to be patient under abuse, whether mathematical, poetical, or historical.

Dame Sippy had had enough, and more than enough, of this sort of thing, as she told him, and followed up the statement by letting him understand that not an infinitesimal addition would she submit to.

The change in Mr. Thomas Sippy's outward demeanour became great in the extreme. To say that it was gentle would fall, perhaps, short of the pronounced effect, and to add that it was meek might give a flattering colour which it did not quite possess. Be this as it may, he looked like a man who had feasted plentifully, in a figurative sense, on humble pie without interfering with his digestion, and was ready to make further progress.

"I think, dame," said he, stirring the

sugar from the bottom of a cup of tea as they sat together, with a small round table acting as a barrier between them—"I think, dame," repeated he, "that we understand what connubial bliss mean, as we used to say at Hoxford."

Dame Sippy entertained no desire of being informed of anything that was said in such a heathen place, believing, as she had heard, that a great deal was spoken there of a kind not so nice as it ought to be.

"I will not go the full length to say," resumed Mr. Sippy, pursing his lips together, and assuming as consequential an air as he dared to adorn himself with temporarily. "I will not go the full length to say," repeated he, "that everything that's said at Hoxford is quite as nice as it ought to be; but the classics——"

"Bother the classics!" interrupted the dame. "Let's have no more of the classics. When you begin to talk of them, I know what the classics mean."

“As I more often than not,” replied Mr. Sippy, “don’t know myself, would you, if in an obliging humour, be kind enough to tell me?”

“A sham,” returned his wife, curtly—
“nothing but a sham. What do you know about the classics?”

“I’ve seen the pictures of a few of ’em,” said Mr. Sippy, blandly.

“The more shame for you,” added the the dame, “and that’s all I’ll say or have said about the matter.”

“In that case, we’ll return, if you please, to the subject I started with”—Mr. Sippy, by way of an episode, here took a deep sip of his tea—“our connubial bliss.”

“The less of your humbug, Tom Sippy—”

Her solitary hearer started and winced, for he knew from recent experience that when he was thus addressed he was sure to be exposed to a battery of great force.

“—The less of your humbug, Tom

Soppy," she repeated, in a tone too deliberate to be musical to his ears, "that I am exposed to this morning, the better I shall be pleased. If ever there was or is a time for that sort of thing, the present is not the right one, as you ought to feel without being told so by me. None of your humbug, Tom Soppy."

"I was only going to observe——"

"Then don't observe it," interrupted the dame, seriously. "Nothing you could say would be worth listening to, and might only add to the long list of stupid things you ought not to have said."

Mr. Thomas Soppy entertained at this moment of his chequered existence what a direct change of position might bring about. For a long series of years he had—still in a figurative sense—been sitting upon his wife, and here was his wife sitting upon him!

"People without brains, Tom Soppy—or, if you like it better, I'll say Sop-*py*—

often let their tongues run loose," continued she, "to make up in chatter what they want in sense."

Mr. Sippy stared with his gooseberry eyes at the bottom of his tea-cup, and came to the sudden conclusion, from what he saw, perhaps, that reticence was a virtue which he had much better sedulously practise than neglect.

"I'll hold my tongue," said he, in an injured tone—"that's what I'll do—I'll hold my tongue."

"Do," responded his wife, with emphasis in the monosyllable. "Do, Tom Sippy. What a treat it would be," she continued, "if you would only keep your tongue to yourself!"

Mr. Sippy at this moment entertained the firm conviction that he was not only sat upon, but flattened—still in a figurative sense—into the shape of a muffin.

"Not being allowed to speak," said he to

himself, in a voice that was not heard even by himself, "I'll say nothing. Henceforth I'm dumb."

The superior force by habit, however, soon surmounted this stubborn resolution, and after an interval of a few moments to recover himself Mr. Sippy felt equal to the task of delivering a mental impression through the common and ordinary expression of speech.

"What a pleasant prospect it is," said he, "to behold the colonel—weakly as he is—walking about with his wife billing and cooing like doves just as if they never had a jolly quarrel in their whole lives. But I saw and heard one, you know, dame, and I'm not likely to forget it."

"Like most people, including ourselves, Tom Sippy," replied the dame, with a predominating quantity of acid in her tone, "man and wife quarrel much too often; but they began and ended with one."

“That *was* a breeze!” ejaculated he. “I can see the colonel now thundering for her to sign the parchments.”

“And the lightning scorched her brain for a time, poor thing!” responded the dame, with grave commiseration in her manner.

“You don’t think she was quite—” and Mr. Sippy significantly touched the centre of his forehead with the end of a forefinger.

“There’s little doubt o’ that,” returned his wife, “when she first arrived from across the sea. For months after, when she was here and attended only by my lady and me, I was afraid that she never could be seen or known by anyone else.”

“With the reports that the house was haunted,” added Mr. Sippy, reflectively, “my manly nerves became unstrung, and from what I saw upon one or two promiscuous occasions I thought she was a ghost—I thought she was a ghost!” repeated he, with great solemnity.

The reminiscence produced a slightly livid effect in Mr. Soppo's features ; but it soon gave way to a more healthy hue.

"The occasions you speak of, Tom Soppo," said the dame, with marked acerbity of manner, "make me remember that if there is a greater coward than another in this county you are that out-an'-out funkier."

"Don't say funkier," expostulated Mr. Soppo. "At Hoxford I was looked upon as a real glutton with the gloves."

"They must have been stuffed then with feathers, and very soft, Tom Soppo," responded his wife, "or you would soon have had enough without being called a glutton."

"Courage, or, as we used to say at Hoxford, pluck, depends upon the state of the stomach," rejoined Mr. Soppo, by way of an extenuating circumstance, "and mine is not always right. At times," continued he, "I am attacked with the willy-wabbles, and my manly nerves seem to go as they come on."

“From what I have so frequently witnessed,” returned the dame, slowly folding her arms, “I suspect that you are never quite free from the complaint.”

Mr. Sippy's self-esteem subsided at this caustic remark, and he seemed to droop beyond recovery.

CHAPTER XXIII.

IT was a rough but sunny day, early in March. The wind blew strong and cold as it hummed through the still leafless branches of the trees, and swept along over hill and dale, wold, heath, fen, and moor, piping his herald tune of the joyous spring-time. Few, as yet, were the flowers to be seen above the frost-locked ground; but among the earliest to sway and nod their golden heads in the breeze were Sir Harold Leferne's daffodils, in full bloom and pride of display. Winters had come and winters had gone; the young had grown old, and the old had left no trace of ever having been; but there were the daffodils as when

Sir Harold's hand first planted them. No decay or "dust to dust" in the daffodils. Time itself was defied by them.

From a cause unknown, or perhaps unthought of by himself, Colonel Leferne, wrapped and carefully protected from the cold as an invalid would be by a loving hand, walked slowly, resting upon his cane, with his eyes fixed upon the flowers, and, upon coming to the end of the bed in which they grew, he turned with the same measured pace and retraced his footsteps.

The colonel continued his solitary march up and down, and before the bed of the flaunting, golden-headed daffodils, thinking of the past as the flowers represented it. Alone, and yet not alone.

It might have been observed that now and again he stopped and listened as if for an expected sound which failed to catch his ear, and, after waiting to be assured of its absence, he resumed his patient walk with the

same even, unaltered action of machinery.

He thought not of the time, and was unconscious how long he had been there, or how often he had paused to listen for the sound which hitherto had not been heard, when in an instant he stood as if rooted to the spot, with his head turned slightly on one side, and bent attentively forward.

"I am not mistaken now," muttered he to himself, with a hectic flush suddenly glowing in his pallid cheeks, "if I was before. That is Aubrey's footfall."

The sound approached. Near and nearer it came, until it ceased close to the shoulders of Colonel Leferne, as he remained in the attitude of attentive listening.

"Having awaited your arrival so long, Aubrey," said he aloud, "I can scarcely say that this is a surprise. Give me your arm," and thus speaking, he turned slowly round and met the steadfast gaze of his son fixed upon him. "Give me your arm," repeated

he. "I want more support now than when you left to live with will unfettered."

"What shall I say, father," returned Aubrey, in a voice scarcely under self-control, "of having left you as I did?"

"As little as possible," replied the colonel, placing an arm in one of his son's, and continuing his walk in front of the daffodils. "You cannot say too little, my dear boy, and, therefore, if in your place, *I* should adopt the pleasant alternative of saying nothing."

"Have I your forgiveness?" asked Aubrey.

"Most perfect," responded his father, smiling. "I cannot conceive anything beneath the moon more complete than my forgiveness. My only astonishment is that you should contemplate for a moment the possibility of my withholding it."

"You state this, father," rejoined Aubrey, "but am I to believe that you are serious and in earnest?"

"Look at me," returned the colonel, "and, if the effect be not too unpleasant for a momentary gaze, say if I seem to apply my words to conceal my thoughts."

"No," added his son, pressing the hand passed through his arm; "your words appear to be their echoes."

"Your sojourn in——"

"Italy," added Aubrey, as his father hesitated to complete the sentence.

"Has evidently qualified you for the accomplishments of a courtier. But, flatter as we may, Aubrey, powder and paint cannot hide the wrinkles of facts. How do I look?"

The abruptness of the question, perhaps, rendered a prompt reply difficult, if not impossible, for his son said nothing as he bent a long and mournful gaze upon his father's pale and bloodless features.

"Your answer is correct, Aubrey," said the colonel, quietly. "We have little time

left for pleasant bantering; but I am happy to think that you have not come too late to pass a few last cheerful hours with your father. Where have you left, or what have you done with your doll?"

Aubrey let his father's arm drop suddenly, and, without moving from where he stood, said nothing in reply.

"The question I learn is anything but agreeable," continued the colonel. "Well, well, let it pass. In the sublime character, however, of an outraged parent, I must suggest that your meeting with Harry Girling should be postponed as long as possible. An outraged parent, Aubrey, when big and muscular is always to be avoided, unless a tendency exists that to be murdered is preferable to suicide."

His son still remained immovable and without uttering a word.

"Let me have the support of your arm again, for I feel weary," said the colonel.

“The wind is cold. We will resume our walk. And so,” continued he, after a short pause, “you have been fortunate enough not to meet or to be run against by this outraged parent, Aubrey, on your way hither.”

“I have seen no one but you, sir, since my arrival,” was the reply, in a voice somewhat unsteady from imperfectly concealed emotion.

“Failing, perhaps, to persuade the outraged parent to take his departure from the neighbourhood in anticipation of your advent,” continued the colonel, “it is not impossible or, indeed, improbable that the Rev. Robert Roundhead has applied sufficient physical force for the attainment of this desirable end. The patriarch, Old Needle-wire, is quite equal to such occasions, and generally attains the command of the situation.”

“I hope that no harm or injury would be done to the man,” observed Aubrey.

“That would entirely depend upon himself, my dear boy,” responded the colonel, “as the patriarch would certainly calculate mathematically the exact strength requisite to overcome the opposing force of resistance, and the weakest, as we all know, is sure to get the worst of it. Let us, however, dismiss the outraged parent from our thoughts. He is not here to disturb us, and that may be as well for him as for you ; for I see—” and he stopped in his walk and drawing himself up to his full height, with his head thrown backwards, bent a look of fatherly admiration upon his handsome son by his side—“for I see,” he repeated, “that the blood of the Lefernes flows freely in your veins, and not one of the name ever yet knew what fear was or turned his back upon an enemy.”

“I do not regard this man as mine,” remarked Aubrey, “let his feelings be what they may of anger or revenge. He knows

only of his one great wrong, and me as the wrong-doer."

"That reminds me," rejoined the colonel, "and you must pardon my curiosity, that a question—probably an objectionable one—remains unanswered. Excuse my repeating it. What has become of your——."

"Wife?" sharply interrupted Aubrey, in a tone and manner not to be mistaken. "Is that, father, what you would ask?"

Not a word escaped Colonel Leferne's lips. They moved as if in utterance; but not a syllable came from them as he stood staring at his son in bewildered astonishment. Slowly drawing a hand mechanically over his face, he at length said, in a voice scarcely raised beyond a whisper, "In the term *wife* you do not mean that the church has given sanction to the title?"

"We were married by the British Chaplain at Naples," replied Aubrey, with a determined, unflinching tone and manner, "under

whose protection my wife remains awaiting my return."

"Then you are the first of your race," rejoined the colonel, in a manner still confused with what he heard, "that ever made honourable reparation to the woman he injured. I begin to think that I ought to admire the exceptional deed more than I confessedly do from, perhaps, the total absence of precedent."

"In acting as I have done I have no reason to regret," added Aubrey. "May I hope that you will acknowledge and presently receive my wife?"

"Without the objection of a thought," returned the colonel, regaining his self-possession, "and let the no longer outraged parent hesitate to accompany or precede her coming. I particularly wish, however, that as a connection of the family he should not be painfully respectful in my presence for the future. Tell him, Aubrey, to keep

his thick, ugly fingers from pulling the unkempt sprout of hair continually over his forehead when addressing me or being addressed, and impress, if possible, upon his obtuse intellect that the back of a hand is not designed by nature for removing the superfluities of the nose. You will oblige me I am sure in these few unimportant particulars concerning your father-in-law, in order to prevent, otherwise, the consequent irritation of my stomach upon the few limited personal interviews we may have from the force of arbitrary circumstances."

"He shall not, sir, trespass upon your privacy," observed his son. "I will take care of that."

"It is within the range of possibility that the patriarch, Old Nails, has adopted most decisive measures to anticipate the necessity of your interference, Aubrey," remarked the colonel. "I suspect that we shall learn of a peremptory and original method for the

extradition of your father-in-law before we are much older or wiser—perhaps spread-eagled on a turnip hurdle, and left for the crows to pick.”

As he was speaking, and before they were aware of her near approach, the attenuated form of a lady, with features ghastly white, noiselessly joined them in their walk side by side. For a few moments nothing was said by either.

“Who is this?” at length ejaculated Aubrey, in tremulous accents.

“Permit me the pleasure,” slowly replied the colonel, bending his head as he spoke, “of being the medium of introducing you to—your mother.”

CHAPTER XXIV.

YEARS had passed since this memorable introduction—memorable, at least, to those whom it immediately concerned. The ancient tomb of the Lefernes containing their knightly dust had been opened not long after it, and an additional tenant gently lowered to its depths to crumble with the rest. That his faults were many, not a single voice was raised to dispute; but the colonel was a gentleman, after all, and one worthy of the grand old family name. Such was the decision of those who professed to know him best, and, perhaps, did so when left “ashes to ashes,” defiant alike to praise or censure. Whatever evil he might have

done had been forgiven, if not forgotten, since the first and last quarrel with his wife, and tears which felt too hot for eyes to shed scalded the blanched cheeks of Julia Leferne as she turned away and quitted the spot where her heart now lay buried with him in death as it had been possessed by him in life from the moment she consented to be his—loving always, if not beloved.

CHAPTER XXV.

THROUGH a system organised solely by William Bottles, the dairy at Bromley Marsh, when he was admitted a sleeping partner with Samuel Wideo, without the impossible introduction of fresh capital, became as flourishing a concern as any of a corresponding kind in the East End of London. Let the demand for milk be what it might there was the prompt supply, although the number of cows remained stationary.

“Leave the working of the concern all to me, Sam,” observed he, upon the conclusion of a more than ordinary good day’s business. “I know my way about. I do *so*.”

“But we can’t give ’em more water, Billy Bottles, than seventy-five per cent.,” remonstrated Samuel Wideo.

“Oh, yes, but we can though!” rejoined the sleeping partner. “We can give ’em all water with a little colouring. What’s chalk for?”

Their tastes agreeing, for both were decidedly partial to draughts of cooper at irregular intervals of the day, and their interests united, Messrs. Wideo and Bottles passed their evenings together in uninterrupted bliss, having the ready means at their command to possess it. As a fixed and unexceptional rule their figures loomed through a cloud of smoke when the cares of the day were gone, and the light of other days illuminated the glories of the past.

Fading and faded, with little left of the original bright purple and orange tints, the Leferne colours still remained suspended upon the wall of the dingy apartment, and

reference was often made to the way in which the bay colt, sire unknown, dam Queen Mary, by Gauntlet, by Bright Steel, by Helmet Plume, carried them to the front in the Derby to the dismay of the layers against him and the joy of his backers.

The partners, sleeping and waking, often thought of his great performance with the admiration of those who had greatly profited by it, and not the slightest division of opinion existed upon the subject.

“He ought to have been kept in training for the cups,” observed William Bottles, watching the thin cloud of smoke curling upwards from his lips as he sat with his companion ruminating upon the past. “He ought to have been kept in training for the cups, Sam,” repeated he.

For a few succeeding seconds Samuel Wideo vouchsafed not a word in reply; but remained staring at the floor beneath his feet, as if expecting to see something

written thereon to prompt his gift of speech. The discovery, perhaps, was made.

"I'm not quite certain, Billy," said he, at the conclusion of the pause for reflection, "but what it's just as well that he was not trained for the cups. A hoss, like a man, ought to leave off trying to win when the game is won."

"Had the colonel lived——"

"But then the colonel did not live," interrupted Samuel Wideo. "The colonel died as he lived, like a gentleman, and about the last order he gave—he knew how to give orders—was that the colt which gained for him the object of his life was never to run again."

"And he never did," added William Bottles.

"And he never did," repeated Samuel Wideo.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THROUGH the laudable practice of that most difficult of Christian virtues, self-denial, Johnny Tadpole attained, in the fulness of time, the height and summit of his ambition, that of being acknowledged the most popular and fashionable light weight of the day. By paying strict attention to reducing the threatened increase of certain "parts," Johnny was able to leave the beam of the scale scarcely in doubt when the feather of "five-stun-seven," including saddle and bridle, was required only to be carried, and nothing could exceed the satisfaction on his own part, and the envy on that of others not so successful as him-

self, in finding that he could keep his weight down.

Great was the call for Johnny's services, and the first, second, and third claims upon them commanded the premiums governed by the general laws of demand and supply. He never "stood down" in any handicap of importance, and, often a good round sum being "put on to nothing," the fashionable light weight grew rich, but not arrogant.

Little Mite could answer for that. Without the opportunity of coming to the front as his friend had done, little Mite shared to some extent, although limited, the successful fortunes of his companion of early, and now of later days.

"We have done pretty well together, Mite," observed he, occupied in turning back a few of the historical leaves of their antecedents, "and we'll continue to do well. I'll ride as long as I can scale the weights I'm wanted for, and when I can't they

may get some one else to take my place."

"They'll have to look sharp to find one," replied little Mite, with an approach to strong indignation in his tone and manner.

"I'm not so sure o' that," modestly returned Johnny Tadpole. "Many of us think," continued he "that when our saddles are empty there'll be nobody to have a leg up in them; but a greater mistake was never made. Good as a chap may be in the pigskin, or any other line of business, trade or profession, be it soldiering, tailoring, sailing, parsoning, and suchlike, a fellow is more than likely to meet with his match, and perhaps his *soo*-perior. I'm not one of those who think there's nobody in the world besides himself."

The abnegation of the remark elevated the speaker, if possible, in the estimation of little Mite; for he felt that the fashionable light weight had scarcely any available space to climb higher than the position he already

occupied, and tears of admiration rose in his eyes, to swim therein without falling to trickle and tickle down his cheeks, as he gazed at Johnny Tadpole's rubicund visage with devoted friendship promoted by the experience of long years of kindly association.

"You're a brick, Johnny, you are indeed!" sobbed little Mite. "You'll excuse me, I know. I can't help it."

"Then try to help it," rejoined the fashionable light weight, with unmistakable energy.

"Then try to help it," repeated he. "Crying won't lay the dust of our troubles, if we cried, as most begin, from the cradle to the grave. Better sing than cry."

"Would you like a song?" inquired little Mite, in a melancholy voice approaching the solemn.

"With much pleasure," replied Johnny, extending a graceful but rather patronizing flourish of a hand. "With much pleasure," repeated he. "Sing by all means."

“Then here goes,” added little Mite; but the effort proved too much for his nervous system, and, in the attempt to clear his voice, it completely choked from emotion.

“Give it up,” ejaculated Johnny Tadpole, slightly irritated. “I’ll ride as long as I can, and you shall want for nothing, Mite, while I can and when I can’t.”

Little Mite felt completely overwhelmed with the kindness of his friend, and, breaking down, he wept as if his heart would break.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE particulars of the arrangement entered into between Aubrey Leferne and Jeremiah Early for the amicable settlement of the pecuniary affairs in connection with his late father and himself never transpired. It was generally known, and often discussed by the gossips in and around Greatwood Park, that Aubrey had behaved honourably and generously to the lawyer, albeit deserving, perhaps, little or nothing at his hands.

They had often for long weary hours, as with the colonel, been closeted together in strict privacy, greatly to the provocation of Mr. Soppys curiosity, which essayed to embrace, not only the family history of the past, but also that of the immediate present and the deferred future. It was, however,

with infinite satisfaction that he gleaned a few important particulars, through the facility of a keyhole, concerning the amicable arrangement finally entered into between Aubrey Leferne and Jeremiah Early. He became possessed with the information, by taking advantage of the keyhole, which removed to some extent a great impediment to the conveyance of sound, that the pots and the pans, the easy-chair, and the grim old portrait of the knight who planted the daffodils were to remain untouched in their respective places. In short, by opportune concessions, the iron grip of adversity was to be relaxed from its long clutch upon the home of the Lefernes and their broad acres, so long possessed by them.

Mr. Soppo learnt all this, with some interesting additions. He understood—distinctly heard, in fact—that an income for life, more than equal to his requirements, was to be granted to Harry Girling, who forthwith was to be his own master, to come

or go when and where it suited his inclination. His cottage, too, was not only to be put in order—if Mr. Soppys ear against the keyhole did not treacherously deceive him—but was to be highly decorated with paint and paper, and ornaments of no mean degree.

Mr. Soppys, at this juncture of the family history, began to hope that he also might find a testimonial in ready preparation for himself, feeling that, if virtue ever merited a particularly conspicuous reward, no more worthy recipient could be found.

Like many other worthy recipients in their own estimation, however, Mr. Thomas Soppys had the mortification of listening to his merits being totally disregarded, and he turned from the keyhole with mingled feelings of chagrin and disappointment.

Dame Soppys, however, at the earliest opportunity which presented itself, called his attention to the historical fact that, so far as she knew, he had never done anything in his life of the value of the smallest

coin in circulation, but had systematically left undone most of the things which he ought to have done for either herself to accomplish or somebody else, down to the very blacking of his own boots and shoes.

“Be satisfied with your place, Tom Sop,” said she, in her high-pitched voice, “and if knowing that you don’t deserve half so good a one will make you more contented, thank your lucky stars at having kept it so long, and, as it appears to me, likely to keep it, as long as you may want a situation of the kind on this side of the——”

“Don’t call the exact spot by the too well-known name,” interrupted Mr Soppy, “the word affects my spirits. Call it six feet by four, or something of that sort.”

“We have grown old in the service of the old family,” rejoined Dame Soppy, with a serious tone and manner becoming the expression of the thought. “Let us try to be thankful, and end it with those who have been so long kind to us.”

CHAPTER XXVIII.

IT was generally known, or at least universally admitted, that Ivy Leferne was the lawful wife of the heir, now in indisputable possession of the ancient estate of Greatwood Park, its freeholds, copyholds, hereditaments, heriots, appurtenances, and all thereunto belonging in fee, expectancy, reversion, or by whatever claim or right anything did, could, would, or should be deemed his hereditary property, let the title be derived only from the good old plan of :

“ Letting him take who has the power,
And let him keep who can.”

The feudal power of the Lefernes had existed too long for the oldest inhabitant of the county to relate the faintest, shadowy

trace of its commencement. The accepted tradition was that they had done just as they pleased with "Will Unfettered" from generation to generation, and in marrying the gamekeeper's daughter Aubrey—it was confessed—had been consistent with the elastic precedents set by his forefathers, albeit exceptional perhaps in the way in which he redeemed the trust of honour reposed in him.

It was strange—so it was thought—that Ivy should not return to Greatwood Park. Her husband had left her, as he said, in Naples, and it was his imperative injunction that there, for a time at least, she should remain. He would visit her at convenient seasons, and use his best endeavour, to make her contented with her Italian home; but she was not to return to England for long, very long, for reasons which he should reserve and express to no one living or likely to live.

Such was the peremptory announcement of Aubrey Leferne concerning his wife, and no one who had the opportunity of listening to it entertained a doubt but what he said he meant.

“But how much our happiness would be increased by having your wife with us, Aubrey,” said his mother, in a soft whisper, with her arms clasped around his shoulders as she gazed entreatingly in his face.

“Do not compel me to repeat my stubborn refusal so often, mother,” replied he, pressing a kiss upon her cheek, “but accept this as my final answer. I cannot comply with your wish, difficult as it is to resist it.”

“Before your reply is to be received as irrevocable, may not my petition be added to my sister’s?” returned Aunt Margaret, with as much reproach in her tone and manner as she was mistress of.

“Let me entreat of you both not to press me further upon this subject,” added Au-

brey. “The time may arrive for my wife to return here and take her rightful place as the mistress of my household; but it cannot be yet. She must learn, as she is assiduously learning, to be qualified for her position, so as not to entail upon me greater humiliation than I have made up my mind to bear, let the consequences be what they may to her or”—he paused before completing the sentence—“to others that I sometimes feel that I love better than myself.”

CHAPTER XXIX.

A FEW short years had fled when, hand in hand, a child might be seen walking by the side of a tall and elegantly-formed woman towards the neighbouring churchyard of Greatwood Park. In the child's hand was a small, well-filled basket of violets and primroses, and as they were passing the long, irregular bed of Sir Harold Leferne's daffodils—planted long years ago, but still blooming as brightly as ever—he darted from her side, and, before she could restrain him, plucked a golden-headed flower and laid it among the collection already gathered.

“This is the prettiest of all,” said he.
“Shall I pluck some more, mother?”

“No,” she replied, sorrowfully, taking the flower, and, pulling it asunder between

her fingers, let the torn and spoiled leaves flutter in ruin to the ground. "No," she repeated. "It may be the prettiest, Aubrey; but we will not have one of these daffodils to mingle with our flowers to-day."

"Why not?" sharply said the boy, turning his dark, bright eyes upwards with an eager, inquiring look.

"You will learn, perhaps, at some future time," she rejoined, in the same sad voice, "why your mother rejected the flower her little son gathered when they went together the morning after their long, long journey to pay a first visit to a grave that she will often return to."

"Whose is it?" inquired he. "You have not told me."

Dropping upon her knees, Ivy Leferne clasped her child lovingly to her bosom, and would have replied, "My father's;" but no sound came from her lips. The words died upon them.

THE END.

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